THE LONG TRAIL BOYS and the SCARLET SIGN

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THE LONG TRAIL SERIES

THE LONG TRAIL BOYS AND THE SCARLET SIGN

THE BLACK MYSTERY RAISED A PAIR OF HAIRY ARMS TO HIM

THE LONG TRAIL SERIES

THE LONG TRAIL BOYS AND THE SCARLET SIGN

BY
DALE WILKINS

FRONTISPIECE BY
EDWIN J. PRITTIE

THE JOHN C. WINSTON COMPANY
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CHAPTER I

Back at Sweet Water

"SOME speedy boy's humping it over the trail, Starlight." Hal Brent shaded his eyes from the glare of the sun to peer shrewdly from under a shielding hand at the still distant but rapidly approaching horseman.

"Bet your boots it's some speedy boy!" was his joyful exclamation after a further keen survey of the rider. "It's Mejicano on Hidalgo! Hi-i-i-i-i! Yi-i-i-i-i! Ki, yi, ki, yip! Yip, yip, yarum!" Hal raised himself in his stirrups, his mouth opening to its widest extent in a wild series of signaling whoops and yells.

The "speedy boy" on the cream-colored pony responded to the yells with equal frenzied jubilance. His dark, handsome face was radiant with good cheer. He was showing his strong, white teeth in a smile of pure joy as he rode up beside Hal and reined in.

"*Ay, mi hermano* [Oh, my brother], it is good to see you again! It is the great surprise. The Señora Brent, your mother, has

said you would be home this evening." Antonio Valdez, Hal Brent's shepherd chum, leaned across his saddle and grasped Hal's hand in a mighty grip.

"I put one over on the folks, Tonums. Couldn't get home too soon to suit me," Hal declared fervently.

"I planned to ride Silver to the station and bring Starlight for you. Now Starlight and Silverheels are the ones to have seen you first. Instead of going to the station for you tonight we will go together for a ride," Antonio said with enthusiasm.

"Will we? Gid-dap! I went out for a run on Silver this morning. First thing, I landed in the bustling burg of High Ledge at seven A. M. and borrowed a motorcycle to skim home on. I'd had breakfast, seen the folks for a while, taken a turn on Silver—all before ten o'clock. Can you beat that? Now it's Star's turn. I try to treat my pair of ponies just alike. But, oh, you Mejicano! You're in a class all by yourself." Hal shook hands with Antonio over again. "I'm going to Mariposa. So are you—*pronto* [soon]."

"I am sorry, *hermano*. I must now hurry to Sweet Water with the list for your father. He wishes to take it to Carson with him this

afternoon. I have told him on the telephone I would bring it before two o'clock. It is almost two," Antonio's eyes sought his leather-strapped wrist watch. "Ride you on to Mariposa. I will go there when I have been to Sweet Water. Until then—*adios.*"

Antonio raised a hand in farewell salute, chirruped a Spanish word or two to Hidalgo, his pony, and was off like the wind. Hal, with eyes full of comradely admiration, watched the erect, graceful figure on the creamy-white, galloping pony. "That thoroughbred belongs to the Long Trail outfit, Star," he proudly told his pony.

Starlight, hearing himself addressed, neighed a friendly response. He was a beautiful jet-black pony with one star-shaped spot on his forehead. "You know all about the Long Trailers, don't you, Boy?" Hal said. Starlight neighed again. "Bet you do. Now show me how we hit up a pace."

The next instant Starlight was off, speeding along the fairly good stretch of packed road which lay between the two great ranches, Mariposa and Sweet Water. Hal's thoughts outran the pony's swift feet as he delightedly dwelt upon the hubbub that his appearance at Mariposa Ranch would create.

"Oh, gee! I wish old Kent were here, too," he said with emphatic regret as presently he came within sight of the white colonial pillars of the Mariposa ranch house. "A whole week to wait for him! If he were here now the outfit could blow not later than Friday. Tough luck!"

Hal let Starlight have his own head. He smiled as the pony galloped through the open gateway of the Mariposa premises and on up the drive which curved to the right, then ran parallel with the house and continued on behind it to a stable. At the curve of the drive the intelligent animal stopped short. Hal sent up a quick, approving cry. Starlight was remembering something he had been taught the previous September just before Hal had gone east to college.

Hal was the proud owner of two exceptionally beautiful and sagacious ponies. Silverheels he had ridden during a mountain trip two summers before through the Nevada ranges. The story of the exciting summer Hal and three of his chums spent in the mountains, accompanied by Norton, a famous guide; Hartwell Craig, the Brent's ranchman neighbor, and David Whitney, a protégé of Craig's, has been already told in "The Long Trail Boys at Sweet Water Ranch."

Hal had brought Starlight with him from Oregon the previous summer where the Long Trail outfit, as the party of woodsmen had named themselves, had passed a stirring vacation in the great Oregon forests. How Starlight carried him gallantly through perilous adventures with a band of lawless night riders whom the Long Trail Boys helped to capture, has been set down in "The Long Trail Boys and the Gray Cloaks."

"You never forget anything, once you've learned it, you peacherino." Hal patted the pony's glossy neck. He fished a lump of sugar from the depths of a pocket of his riding trousers and treated Starlight. Next he put his fingers to his lips and whistled long and shrilly. Starlight gave a funny little whinny, as if he, too, were trying to whistle. Hal threw back his head and laughed. "Pretty good, Boy," he praised.

When the outfit had returned from Oregon the previous summer, Hal had been a daily visitor at Mariposa Ranch until he had been obliged to start east, there to enter his sophomore year at Yale University. He had taught both Silverheels and Starlight to come to a stop at the curve of the drive while he whistled for Craig. Now, after several months of

absence from his ranch home, he had discovered delightedly that Starlight had not forgotten.

"Where's Craig, I wonder?" he said impatiently after he had whistled three times in succession. From inside the house no answering whistle came. He noted that the heavy oak front door, usually standing ajar, was closed. He sent up another piercing blast. As it died out the front door opened and a yellow face looked out, followed by a white-clad form. Chang, the Chinese house man, stepped smiling upon the veranda.

"How you, Misser Hal?" he inquired delightedly. "I don' hear you wissel 'cause I pick peas in the garden. I come house wis the peas. I hear you, then see you. Wen Yung go High Ledge. He don' hear you wissel."

"He'd have to have some ears," was Hal's laughing reply, "Where are Craig, Norton, and Whitney? Gone to High Ledge, too?"

"No; go Misser Norton's house. Go way yesserday. Come back morry. They say go quick; hurry." Chang had come down the steps and across the lawn to Hal. "I glad see you, Misser Hal; velly glad."

"Put her there, Chang." Hal reached

down from the saddle and offered a hand to Chang. The China boy was as much of a friend to him as were the Brent's own faithful Chinese servants of years. Chang, Tah Fom, and Hal had played together as little boys.

"You stay see me, I give you almond cookies Wen Yung make this morning," coaxed Chang. "I know you like. We eat many times long go."

"Yours truly. I have to hang around, anyway, and wait for Tony. He promised to meet me here." Hal got down from Starlight. "Stay where you are, Star," he told the pony with a final pat on the head. He and Chang turned and walked toward the house.

The pair went into it, soon reappearing, each munching a crisp almond cooky. Hal's hands and pockets were full of the toothsome sweets for which Wen Yung, Craig's Chinese cook, was famed. Hal went over to Starlight and thrust a cooky into the pony's ready mouth. He fed his pet a second almond tidbit, while Chang looked on with beaming approval.

"Let's sit on the front steps and have a talk-fest," Hal genially proposed. "How's every little thing, Ching Chang?"

"Good! velly good!" Chang showed small, even teeth in a fresh burst of cheerful smiles. Straightway he began to chatter about the ranch and Hal's three absent friends. He showed a lively curiosity concerning Hal's college life in the East and asked numerous questions.

Half an hour slipped by, then three-quarters. The pair on the steps were still deep in conversation when a ringing halloo from the road announced the arrival of Antonio. Chang got up from the steps of the veranda and went into the house. He returned with a heaped plate of almond cookies just as Tony reined Hidalgo in beside Starlight.

"Nobody home but Chang and Hal. Have a couple of cookies, but no more. I need the rest," was Hal's generous stipulation.

"It is I who need them most." Antonio calmly helped himself to half a dozen cookies. "You must already have eaten four times more than these."

"You have nerve, Mejicano," Hal replied as he charitably fed Hidalgo a cooky. "You see what a good sport I am. I overlook your insults and feed your cayuse at the same time."

"*Mi madre* [my mother], what kindness!"

Antonio raised derisive eyebrows. "But where are the bosses, and David?"

"Gone to Norton's shack, blame the luck! If I'd been home a day sooner I'd have gone with 'em, and so would you. Chang says they'll be home tomorrow." Hal looked briefly disappointed. "Craig's the proud owner of a new nag. It stood him a bunch of coin. Don't know whether it's pink, striped, or variegated. What color is Craig's new horse, Chang?"

"You can see. Misser Craig don' ride he away. Is in the stable," Chang returned. He appeared surprised that Hal had not understood the fact.

"Wha-at?" Hal showed pleased surprise. "I didn't get you, sport. Come on, I must have a look at this gilt-edged cayuse." Beckoning impatiently to Chang and Antonio, Hal started for the stable, full speed.

"Stung again!" he exclaimed as Chang and Antonio caught up with him in front of the closed stable doors. "The horse hang-out is closed. Where's Pedro, Chang? He must have the keys."

"Maybee gone High Ledge, maybee som'-where on ranch. New horse cost much money, so maybee he lock horse in the stable 'cause

he go som'where and Misser Craig away." This was Chang's sage opinion.

"That's about it, I guess. Let's peek in a window, Mejicano. A squint at our classy animal friend will be better than nothing." Hal promptly disappeared around a corner of the stable.

Unlike the stable at Sweet Water Ranch, the Mariposa stable was a comparatively small building. It was built of stone and its several good-sized windows were netted with heavy wire. Hartwell Craig kept in it not more than half a dozen horses, but these were thoroughbreds. The ponies and horses used to carry on the work of the ranch were housed at the eastern end of the ranch in a larger stable with a spacious corral attached.

Antonio and Chang reached Hal in time to see him holding himself up to the window by his hands. He had caught and clung to the rather narrow window ledge and had drawn himself up until he could look into the stable through the wide-meshed wire screen.

"He's a four-footed bird!" Hal's feet found the ground again. His face registered enthusiasm of Craig's new purchase. "He's a good deal the color of Hidalgo, only darker; pale tan color with darker tail and mane."

Hal picked up a wooden chair with a circular back and arms and a solid seat, which stood in front of the stable. It was the favorite seat of Pedro, the Mexican stableman, when he was not busy in or about the stable. "Here's where I take a front-row peek at him." He carried the chair around a corner of the stable to the window he had just left, setting it squarely under the window. "Going up," he said as he stepped nimbly to the seat.

"Oh, shucks! Don't beat it to the back of the stall, Stingy," he told Serapis. "Give us a chance to look at you." He took a backward step from the chair, bumping smartly against Tony. "Come on around to the back window that opens on his stall. We can see him better from there." He took up the chair again and started with it to the rear of the stable.

"Jumping Jupiter!" Antonio and Pedro heard him exclaim. The next second they had followed him around a rear corner of the stable, curiosity written large on their faces. Hal's attention was fixed upon an object which he was holding up in both hands. "Where did this drop from?" he called out. "It must belong to Pedro. It looks Mexican."

"I don' know. Never see Pedro have."

Chang was eying the object doubtfully. It was a knapsack, medium-sized, made of very soft, dark green leather with an odd design embroidered in gold thread on the under side. Attached to it was a narrow strap to be flung over the shoulder, of the same soft leather.

Hal turned the bag over. The flap side was monogrammed in gold thread and was fastened by a round, button-shaped dull gold clasp, in the middle of which sparkled an emerald of at least a carat weight, apparently flawless.

"Let me take it, *hermano*." Tony studied the odd green knapsack which Hal handed him. He gave special attention to the monogram, carefully scrutinizing it in an attempt to make out the letters which composed it. "I do not believe this is Mexican," he said slowly. "It seems to me to be Oriental, not Indian or Spanish."

"It is no Chinese" Chang said very positively.

"It looks like something not grown in the United States," was Hal's flippant opinion.

"It is yours—until some one else claims it." Tony handed the bag back to Hal with a teasing smile.

"Something in it." Hal wagged his head

hopefully at Antonio. His exploring fingers had come into contact with some sort of hard object inside. "I'm not nosey; I won't open it just yet. I'll deck myself out with it for good luck till Pedro comes. No harm in that." Hal slung the strap across one of his shoulders. He took a few strutting steps back and forth, flaunting his new find. "Go ahead, Mejicano, take a squint at the *caballo* [horse]." He had already placed the chair in position before the window.

"*Hermoso* [beautiful]!" was Tony's ejaculation as he stared at the horse through the wire netting. "He is as fine as Hidalgo; but I like him no better. Señor Brent says Hidalgo is the wonderful horse." Tony loyally refused to give Craig's new mount first place in his opinion.

"Silver and Star have 'em all beaten." Hal always rooted for his two favorites.

Chang declined with smiles to "rubber" at the thoroughbred. "I see him other day. Misser Craig bring out for long time," he told Hal.

"All right; you're excused." Hal took a last admiring look at the new horse, then returned the chair to its original position in front of the stable. "Wish Pedro were here. He—"

"See; Pedro come now; over there." Chang pointed to a horseman who had just ridden through the main gateway of the ranch.

"Here's luck, very first thing. I wanted to see Pedro. I hung the magic knapsack on my shoulder. Whish-h-h! Whi-r-r! Here's Pedro." Hal patted the soft leather of the embroidered knapsack. "Let me hand it to you. *You are* some spiffy little rag bag."

CHAPTER II

A Puzzle That Was Not Chinese

"*BUENOS dias* [good day], Pedro!" Hal shouted to the approaching Mexican. "Just our speed. Break open the zoo. We want to see the animals. Know anything about this?" He slipped the strap from his shoulder and waved the green bag at the smiling stableman.

"What is?" Pedro had now ridden close to the three in front of the stable. He dismounted hastily, his sharp, black eyes fixed upon the green knapsack.

"Say it's yours, and grab it. How I hate to part with it! I've had it only ten minutes, but I'm deeply attached to it." Hal gave a realistic sob.

"You don't cry; you can keep," Pedro returned with grinning satire. "It is no mine. I think you try hard fool me."

"*Not yours!* Luck again." Hal flourished the green bag about his head and capered joyfully around the stableman.

"Why you think it is mine? Where you

find?" The Mexican showed mild curiosity.

"Picked it up under one of the back stable windows. That's part of your stamping ground, you know, old man."

Pedro shook his head. "I don't know how come there." He showed frowning surprise. "I don't go back there today for nothing, Señor Craig is no here. So he can't come to the stable. No one come only Chang to say me the meals ready. Some one leave this bag last night when it is dark. That is not good. That mean some one come to the stable and don't want anyone to see. Maybe come to steal the new horse. Come in the dark. *Muy malo* [very bad]."

"If a rustler'd been sneaking around after dark trying to run off with Craig's gilt-edged *caballo*, he'd not have left anything like this behind him. Rustlers don't carry spiffy, jeweled knapsacks."

Pedro's frown grew blacker. He was silent for a moment. Then he turned a rapid flow of vehement Spanish upon Tony. Tony listened to him with thoughtful attention.

"*No hablo Español* [I don't speak Spanish]," Hal interrupted the two jokingly. "Come across. Let your friends into the grand gabble."

"Pedro is worried," Tony translated. "He says Señor Craig's new horse came from across the Mexican border. It is the very valuable *caballo*. Señor Craig paid a high price for it. He thinks Mexican bandits may have heard of the sale, and are trailing the horse to steal it. He says a bandit chief may have carried the bag and dropped it here."

"Go on!" Hal flouted the idea. "We're too far from the border for bandits. This glorified grub bag wouldn't match the kind of costumes these Mexican snatchers sport. Sometimes their complete rig-out is a sombrero and a pair of old pants. They're a roughneck tribe."

"Some chiefs, *no*." Pedro waved a disagreeing finger. "Some bandits have fine saddle, good clothes, jewels, oh-h—plenty diamonds. These rob the rich plantations. Steal things like this." He pointed to the green knapsack.

"You may be on the right track." Hal was somewhat impressed by the Mexican's theory. "Since this bag's not yours or Craig's, I dare open it. I'll say this is a genuine emerald." Hal held the jeweled clasp between thumb and finger.

Pedro, Tony and Chang watched him

interestedly, eager to see what the green leather bag contained. It appeared to contain little save the small, hard object Hal had fingered. That object made a slight bulge in the soft, fine leather.

Hal unfastened the clasp and lifted back the plain, overlapping green flap. He peered curiously into the depths of the pocket, then ran an exploring hand into it. Out came the hand, bringing with it what appeared to be a black silk handkerchief, folded into a square.

"Ta-ta!" He shook out the square of black silk, lightly flapping it in the faces of his companions. "What a wonderful find! I'll say the owner of the green gew-gaw is a Mexican tailor."

Three pairs of eyes blinked at the black banner flaunted before them. All three looked disappointed, then laughed a little.

"Try it over again, *amigo* [friend]," Hal mockingly encouraged himself. He laid the piece of silk on the seat of the wooden chair and went on fishing. This time his hand closed over the object, the hardness of which he had already felt through the leather of the bag. Brought to light he found himself staring at the oddest trinket he had ever seen.

"*Mi madre!*" Tony and Pedro exclaimed exactly together. Chang was staring at the trinket in Hal's hand in admiring wonder.

"Judas Priest!" Hal was no less amazed. He was holding up a tiny Chinese pagoda, made of carved ivory, not more than six inches tall and two inches wide. Out of one of the tiny, open sides of the pagoda leaned a diminutive ivory monkey. Its wee, ivory face had the peculiarly wizened appearance of the simian. Two small flawless rubies formed the eyes. Around its neck was a tiny circlet of gold. A third ruby blinked a fiery little eye from the center of the gold circlet. As a piece of ivory carving alone, it was a marvel.

"What in Sam Hill is it?" Hal, head tilted to one side, wonderingly inspected the curio. "It's certainly worth a penny. It's carved ivory, and those stones are rubies."

"Chinese pagoda look like that," declared Chang. "I born in California, but I know how pagoda look. Maybe one Chinaman make this." He touched the ivory trinket almost reverently. "It is velly boo-tiful."

Pedro fired a sudden burst of Spanish at Antonio, his deep tones very vehement.

Tony threw back his head and laughed. Pedro did not smile, but instead looked utterly solemn.

"Pedro is afraid of this," Tony told Hal, nodding at the pagoda.

"Say, what's the matter with you, sport?" Hal laughingly demanded of the solemn-faced Mexican.

"It is true, I don't like," Pedro maintained stoutly. "Never have I seen such. This thing," he indicated the tiny monkey, "has the red evil eyes. A *brujo* [wizard] has looked in the window at the horse and dropped the queer bag. This *brujo* is an evil spirit. The *caballo* will die or bring misfortune on Señor Craig."

"Oh, ho, ho! There ain't no such animal. I never would have thought that of *you*, Pedro. You're as bad as old Shy Beaver with his Jonah band of spirit granddaddies. Come out of it." Hal waved the pagoda before Pedro's eyes. The stableman dodged it in superstitious haste. "The owner of *this* peach isn't a spooky spook. This monkey in the pagoda is a talisman, I'll say. The fellow who dropped the green bag under the stable window never intended to leave it there. You'd better stick to your first dope."

"How could such a bag be easily lost? It has the shoulder strap." Tony eyed the green bag speculatively. "It may have slipped from the shoulder of some one in the dark. But why should that one be under the stable window at night? It has the suspicious look."

"Maybe there's a key to the riddle in the bag." Hal's hand went into the bag again. His fingers fastened upon something velvety and also upon what seemed to be a small, embossed card. He drew the card and a tight little roll of black velvet out together. He caught a flash of scarlet as he separated them.

"Hold it." He poked what he still thought was a small scarlet card at Tony, and began smoothing out the rolled-up piece of black velvet. In the same instant he sent up an amazed, "Wow!" The piece of black velvet was a mask; not merely a piece of velvet with three holes cut in it. It was a curiously fitted mask; soft, yet so cleverly fashioned as to fit the features. Three narrow elastic bands were placed at the vertical edges of the mask as a means of keeping it perfectly in place.

"Go to the head of the class, Pedro. This is a dead give-away on the fellow who lost the

flossy knapsack. Craig had better come home *pronto*. Friend bandit may take a hike back here for the bag and the horse. Here he comes." Hal tried the mask over his own merry features. He made a sudden forward lunge at Pedro. The Mexican took a lurching step backward.

"You don't have to make the fun of me 'cause I joomp," he protested with a sheepish smile. "I am no afraid. Three times I have fight the bandits. Fight for my life."

"A real scout, and a great fighter. Right in line with the world's biffiest scrappers!" Hal pretended deep admiration.

Pedro gave a throaty chuckle. He was not in the least ruffled by Hal's teasing. Sooner or later, everyone who knew Hal Brent grew genially accustomed to the irrepressible youngster's gay sallies; not only grew used to them, but courted them.

"Now for the Christmas card." Still wearing the mask, Hal glanced toward Tony. Tony had been too busy examining the scarlet square which Hal had tucked into his hand to pay much attention to the mask. He now raised his eyes to Hal's, offering him the little square.

"This is the queer thing, too," he said. "I

think it is a Chinese puzzle. I know nothing else it can be. It is something like a Chinese monogram."

"It's like one of those Chinese curlicues that you can't find head or tail to." Hal laid the square flat in the palm of his hand.

At first glance the curious square had appeared to be red, but closer examination revealed a yellowish background. It was nothing other than a two-inch square of very thin, smooth, yellowish wood. Upon each side of it was an intricate, serpentine pattern painted in brilliant scarlet. It looked like a monogram, and the design was so intricate as scarcely to show the faded, yellowish foundation. From it no letter or letters could be deciphered.

"Can you make it out, Chang? Are these letters Chinese?" Hal eagerly inquired.

Chang took the square in his hand and studied it soberly. "I don' know," he finally said with a baffled shake of the head. "I think it is nothin'. I don' b'lieve it make any Chinese letters, not 'Melican letters, either. No Chinese sign; nothin'." He fluttered his free hand discouragingly.

"Nothing it is. That lets us out. Why worry? You've said it, Ching Chang." Hal

offered the scarlet square to Pedro, who was holding out his hand for it, and renewed an industrious digging in the bag. Once more he found something; a little round pasteboard box, not more than half an inch deep. Opened, it disclosed three small-caliber revolver bullets.

"Let's have an exhibition." Hal took off the mask; laid it on the chair seat. He ranged the bullet box next to the mask. The scarlet square came next to the bullet box. He set the pagoda at the end of the row, stood the green bag up on the chair behind the array, and draped the piece of black silk over the chair back.

"What does it look like?" he asked, stepping back to view the effect.

"I don't like," Pedro said flatly. "*Malo, muy malo.*"

Antonio smiled, and shrugged his broad shoulders. "It is not anything to find the revolver bullets, or these other queer things. But the mask—." He paused with another shrug. "I believe it is the mask of a clever one—maybe he is the bandit; maybe he is the rustler. But he is one who has traveled far, and knows much of the world. Something, I know not what, about all these things placed together on the chair, tells me this."

"It is true," Chang agreed very solemnly.

"That's the way it strikes me, too, Mejicano," Hal returned quite seriously. "There's something mottled about this little lay-out. If the whole business is on the level, the fellow who lost this knapsack will come to Mariposa and claim it. Don't you ever believe he won't be able to say where he thinks he lost it. He'll have to have a good excuse, though, for prowling back of the stable after dark. If he's on the level, he'll have that excuse. If he isn't, he'll have to do without his playthings and his grab bag."

CHAPTER III

Surprising "Old Hal"

"CUT out the high huzzas. Old Hal's pony express is due, and overdue." George Davis hastily closed the door of the living room at Mariposa which opened into the hall, and out of which he had been vigilantly peering. "For the love of Pete, keep quiet. Don't spoil the fun. He's in for a quizzing and the grand-slam bounce. He'll duck if he hears a racket going on in here."

George addressed this well-meant caution to a rollicking company gathered in Craig's living room for the express purpose of "putting one over on old Hal." He had appointed himself doorkeeper of the realm and was recklessly "bossing" the gang.

"Can't say I like your tone, Davis," Hartwell Craig objected.

"Downright disrespectful to two old scouts like us," Norton backed Craig. "Respect the aged, George."

"I will—about fifty years from now,"

George promised with a wide, derisive smile. "It takes a white top piece to command respect. Go get it, both of you. Then come back and speak to me about it."

"I hope we'll be a long time getting it," Norton declared. Both Norton and Craig were in their early forties, and were brown-haired and as agile and full of life as were the Long Trail Boys themselves.

Quiet settled upon the company. George continued to keep an ear close to the door so as to hear the door bell when it should ring. The Long Trail outfit, including Gam Fu, the China boy, were assembled to give Hal Brent a surprise. He had been the founder of the Long Trail outfit.

The unexpected arrival of Kent Sherwood at Mariposa Ranch on the second morning after Hal's arrival home had furnished the opportunity for the surprise party. Kent had said good-bye to Hal on the platform of the New Haven railway station with the secret, gleeful knowledge that he was going west only two days later than Hal. His good-natured Aunt Edith, with whom he made his home in New England, had excused him from the week at home which he was to spend with her before starting for Nevada. Kent

had to decide between going home with Hal or waiting two days and giving him a "big surprise." He could not resist the idea of the surprise.

He had arrived in High Ledge on an early morning train and had rented a motorcycle so as to reach Mariposa Ranch quickly, thus lessening the possibility of meeting Hal on the way. He had found David, Craig, and Norton at Mariposa and received a boisterous welcome from them. They had come from the trip to Norton's shack the evening previous but had not seen Hal. Hal had ridden over that day to see them, but finding they had not yet come home had gone away again.

Craig had immediately busied himself on the telephone and learned that Hal had gone with Cummings, his favorite foreman, to Four Points Ranch, at the far western confines of Sweet Water. He had also called up Antonio Valdez and George Davis, both of whom were protégés of Mr. Brent and employed on the ranch. Antonio and George had been told the good news of Kent's arrival and were duly instructed to bring Gam Fu to Mariposa with them that afternoon.

It was now late afternoon. Cummings had been detailed to bring Hal to Mariposa Ranch

with him on the plea of having an errand there. The jolly crowd in the living room were impatiently waiting for them.

"Sh-h-h!" George hissed softly. He held up a cautioning hand as the sound of an electric bell was borne to the listeners' ears. Then came Hal's quick tones and the tramp of two pairs of feet down the hall.

"Craig in the living room, Chang? All right," they heard Hal say. There followed an attempt to turn the knob on the living-room door. "What's the matter with that door?" they next heard. "Good night!"

George made sweeping, threatening signs for further silence. He continued to grasp the knob, holding it so firmly that Hal could do nothing with it. "Who's there?" he roared in a deep, hoarse voice.

"You'll find out when the door caves in," was the cheerful response. "Rip, rip, ready!"

"Wait a minute. What gang?"

"Long Trail outrage—excuse me—I mean outfit."

"Give the countersign."

"Rough house. Let me at 'em," Hal retorted significantly.

"What coat of arms?"

"Three biscuits on a board." Hal heard a general snicker.

"Give the sacred oath," George commanded, smothering a laugh.

"A-hem! Here goes. After that the door goes. Get this, you fake. May I be zipped zigzag into space, drowned standing up in a mud hole, shot porous, ridden twenty miles on a balky burro, and fed on Craig's cooking, if ever I am false to my vows as a Long Trailer. Now, heave, heave, heave, ho!"

George suddenly released his grip on the knob and flung open the door just as Hal hurled himself against it, full force. He plunged into the room with sufficient momentum to send him hurtling forward almost to where Kent stood.

"Hi, hi, hi, yi! Hurray!" Hal's exuberant shouts made the big room ring. It was the signal for a general jubilation. During the next ten minutes joyful pandemonium reigned. Under cover of it, Cummings, Hal's companion, slipped away, thoughtful not to intrude upon the reunionists.

"You're a foxy bunch. I'd disown you, but something makes me hesitate." Hal wagged a knowing head at the laughing group which surrounded him. "And you—you old oyster," he poked Kent in the chest with one finger, "you're the biggest fake of all.

How I hate to lift you from the George Washington class. Is this your idea of next week? It didn't take you long to hit up a pace for the golden West after I blew, did it?"

"Not very long." Kent's smile was genial and expansive.

"Oh, boy!" Hal whacked Kent forcefully between the shoulders. "Can you beat it? The whole outfit's here tonight. The Long Trail gang is going to blow suddenly. Yes?"

A united clamor of assent went up. The outfit was of the same happy mind. Even Gilbert Norton and Hartwell Craig were as ready to take the trail again with the boys as were the boys themselves.

"This gathering was planned as a surprise for you, Hal. I'll admit I thought of it also as an excellent opportunity to discuss our summer plans," Craig said when the first noisy glee of the reunion had subsided.

"I certainly appreciate my surprise party. With Kent here we're a week ahead of the game. There's nothing I'd rather hear than when we are going to hit the trail," Hal answered enthusiastically.

"The last of this week, if we hustle," Norton said. "The gang's all here. We've no ponies to buy, or much to do except

gather the supplies, and be off. After dinner tonight we'll settle the whole business. Let's drop it for the time being and go for a ride before dinner."

"The rest of you fellows have your own Oregon ponies here. I'll have to borrow a cayuse from you, Craig. Tomorrow Spice and I will have a reunion," Kent said.

"You're welcome to use any of my horses, but Tony brought Spice from Sweet Water for you," Craig replied. "I'm going to try out my new horse. His name is Serapis. He's a wonder."

"You'd be a greater wonder if you'd stay at home once in a while," Hal grumbled. "I came over here day before yesterday, and something happened. I came over again yesterday to tell you about it. Still no trace of you. I saw your gilt-edged cayuse. Is he still there?"

"Yes, he is. What is this business about a green bag and a bandit and some one after my new horse to steal him?" Craig demanded curiously. "Pedro and Chang have both been trying to tell me about it. I'd like to see the evil eye which Pedro says you have, and hear what it's all about."

"Oh, pshaw! That's too bad. The bag's

at home. I put it in the safe. I'll bring it over tomorrow. Anybody here inquiring for it?" Hal laughed as he asked the question.

"Nary a soul. Pedro has two of the men from the big stable on duty with him at night. He's packing a gun, and is all ready for battle."

The rest of the outfit were already in the hall and trooping toward a side entrance to the house which opened to the lawn. Hal and Craig hurriedly brought up the rear, discussing the incident of the bag as they went. The guests' ponies, as well as the horses from the smaller stable, were all disporting themselves in a grassy corral a short distance below the stable. Pedro was at the corral with them, watching them with the fond eye of the true horse lover. He had spied Starlight from where Hal had tied him to a tree on the side lawn, and brought him to the corral.

"Hello, Pedro," hailed Hal as the Mexican opened the corral gate. "I hear you've turned gunman. By George, I don't wonder!" Hal came to an admiring stop a little way from the new horse, Serapis. The others were already exclaiming over the beautiful animal.

"He is taller than Hidalgo, yet it seems to

me they are of the same breed," was Tony's opinion of the horse. "Of course you have the pedigree of this horse, which makes him of more value. We have none of Starlight and Hidalgo, but I think Hal and I are very fortunate to have the horses."

"I know you are. Hidalgo looks as if he might be a brother of Serapis. And Starlight is a hummer. I never have been able to understand how Norton happened upon such a pony bargain. I paid twenty times the price of that whole Oregon bunch of ponies for Serapis. I'm satisfied, though. I saw him, I wanted him, *and* I *got* him," Craig smiled whimsically.

"How'd you happen to get hep to him?" Hal wanted to know. The faces of the other boys reflected Hal's curiosity. They had drawn nearer to Craig and Tony, interested in their horse talk.

"Oh, I saw him almost two years ago when I was on a business trip to Mexico. He belonged to a haughty Don named Crespero. Serapis is well known in Mexico. He's said to be the fastest horse across the border, though he's never been entered in a race. He's a pure Arabian type. Crespero would never tell anyone much about Serapis except

that he came from Algeria. The horse's pedigree is in Arabic. I know Arabic, so I could read it for myself. That seemed to surprise the Don. I never thought of such a thing as owning Serapis until I heard that the revolution had hit Crespero hard, and that he was willing to sell Serapis. I certainly hotfooted it to Juarez; Crespero's plantation is not many miles from there."

"How did you manage to bring him here?" Kent asked breathlessly. Even Whirlwind, John Brent's thoroughbred mount, was no more to be admired than the long-bodied, graceful newcomer to Craig's stable.

"Crespero shipped him in a special express car and sent a couple of Mexican grooms with him. He took the risk. I deposited my check to Crespero in bank in payment for the horse. I made it payable to him only upon the delivery of the horse in a satisfactory condition. I had a tedious wait for Serapis, but he's worth the effort I made to secure him." Craig cast a proud glance at the beautiful horse.

"You forgot to tell the fellows the yarn that goes with Serapis," David Whitney reminded, his serious brown eyes dancing.

"Heard from at last!" Hal exclaimed.

"Any little remark from you is precious, dear silent-face." David was frequently teased by his comrades for having little to say.

"Oh, *that* yarn!" Craig laughed. "I happened to talk to a couple of Mexicans one night in a restaurant at Juarez. I think they knew I had bought Serapis from Crespero, for one of them began talking about the horse. He kept nodding mysteriously and finally said he had heard that Crespero had bought Serapis from a great bandit who was really a friend of Crespero and was in hiding somewhere near the Don's plantation. This bandit was supposed to be a terror. Don't mention this to Pedro." Craig motioned toward the retreating form of Pedro who had left the corral and was now almost to the stable door. "He's upset enough now over that green bag affair."

"When we come back from our run, Hal, let us hear the true story of that green bag. If we are going for a ride before dinner, it's time we started out." Norton was more anxious for a ride with the boys than for yarn spinning.

"I'll stop at Sweet Water, if we go riding in that direction, and get the bag from the safe," Hal offered, energetically obliging. "Say,

Kent," he turned to Kent, his eyes full of mischief, "do you notice anything special in that choice mob of cayuses?"

A giggle broke from Gam Fu at the question. Attired in a white duck house suit, his small feet white shod, a round white duck hat on his sleek brown head, a gay-colored silk scarf fluttering from the soft collar of his white silk blouse, Gam Fu bore small resemblance to the poorly dressed, meek-eyed China boy with whom Hal had sworn friendship at the Oregon lumber camp where Gam had been a waiter. A year at Sweet Water Ranch had done wonders for Gam.

"You lookee smart, Misser Kent, you see," he gurgled.

"I'm lookee-ing as smart as I can," Kent declared, his blue eyes searching for the special "something." He counted the ponies, then he counted the members of the party. There was exactly a horse apiece. He began mentally pairing off his comrades and their own horses. There was Serapis for Craig, Norton's chestnut, Prince, Tony's Hidalgo—Kent began to laugh as his eyes came to rest on a fat gray pony. "Got it." He whirled a triumphant hand above his head. "Gam pairs off with Sinbad!"

"You betee." Gam joined in the hand flourishing. "Me gleat rider now, you see."

"Go to it," Kent encouraged, giving Gam a friendly slap on the shoulder.

His cheerful advice to Gam was a signal for a general noisy claiming of ponies. In a twinkling the outfit was mounted and racing down the drive toward the gates. The cavalcade swept through the big double gateway in high feather. The buoyant horsemen were hallooing from pure pleasure at being once more together and in saddle. Down the road in the direction of Sweet Water Ranch the spirited party galloped, keeping almost neck and neck, all except Gam Fu. Sinbad was now too fat to be a racer; neither had he the least desire to be one. This was one of his most commendable points to Gam Fu. The high-speed ponies of the others soon left Sinbad and Gam far behind. Gam squealed "Gid-apee, gid-apee!" a few times at Sinbad, then permitted the pony to settle into a placid jog.

The pony riders presently turned a curve in the road and disappeared from Gam's sight. He calmly gave up the chase and chirped to Sinbad, "You tlied, Slinbad, me tleatee you nicee." Taking two small sugar cookies from

a pocket of his white blouse he fed them to the pony, and then he let Sinbad poke along while he treated himself to a cooky.

He was still jogging placidly along the road, half an hour later, when a loud shouting from the south told Gam of the return of the outfit.

"You may win some day, if you keep on going," David shouted as the riders neared Gam.

"My, you're classy! You'd rather go riding all by yourself on your little gray horsie," Kent yelled at the chuckling China boy.

"You deserve a medal for staying back and giving the rest of us a chance." Even Norton could not resist "joshing" Gam.

At the word "medal," Hal was seized with a mischievous inspiration. In a pocket of his riding coat was the odd scarlet insignia which he had found in the green bag, but which he had reserved for further examination when he had placed the bag in the safe at Sweet Water. He had intended to show the square to Ling Gai, the oldest Chinese employee of the ranch who was cook at Four Points. Ling Gai happened to be on his annual two weeks' vacation. Cummings had examined the square and asked if it might not be a Chinese medal.

Hal had heard the word "medal" and reached into the pocket that held the scarlet oddity.

"Step to the front, Mr. Fu, I'm going to present you with a medal," he announced. "Get off your horsie, and take off your round, white hat. Look grateful." Hal dismounted and walked over to Gam. Gam slid from the saddle, giggling, while the others gathered around the pair, keeping up a fire of derisive remarks.

"Esteemed 'fren,' and Long Trailer," Hal declaimed in a loud, pompous tone. "Ahem! In recognition of your many golden qualities and your delicate generosity in modestly keeping your pacer several miles behind the winning post, I take pleasure in medaling you up."

"Hear, hear! Rah, rah, rah for Gam!" George Davis led off with wild cheers. The Long Trailers whooped for Gam, lustily and buoyantly.

"Stand still, sport, while I decorate you," said Hal as he deftly tucked the scarlet square into the breast pocket of Gam's white coat, where it stood out vividly against the white field.

Gam glanced down at the "medal." In the midst of a gleeful grin his expression

changed. He snatched the scarlet square and threw it as far away from him as he could throw. Up went his arms and his voice. He gave a queer, shrill little cry of terror, and set off in the direction of Sweet Water Ranch as fast as he could run.

CHAPTER IV

The Scarlet Sign

"THE frenzied finish of a well-meant presentation!" Hal declared with laughing irony. "So long. It's up to me to gallop after my esteemed 'fren' and find out what bit him." Hal started Starlight up the road after Gam.

"Let's all go." Kent sent Spice racing after Starlight and the next instant the rest of the riding party were thundering up the road in pursuit of the still fleeing Chinese boy. Tony, however, stopped long enough to catch Sinbad's bridle, before joining the others.

Gam could run like a hunted rabbit. He was making good time when Starlight came up with him. "Hi, there, Gam! Come out of it," Hal called cheerily. "What got your Chinese goat?" He made a flying leap from the saddle, dropping lightly beside Gam.

Gam cast a frightened look at Hal. "Where you getee?" he asked in a slightly quavering tone. "Som'bodee give you?"

"Nope, I found it. So it's the medal you

couldn't stand. What do you know about it, Gam?" Hal's voice suddenly gained a more serious note.

"No much. Velly bad. Me gladee you *find*. Me—"

"What's that? Very bad, and glad I found it? You certainly are rattled, or else you are no esteemed 'fren' of mine."

"No-ee, no-ee;" squealed Gam in distress; "you no un'erstan'. Me glad nobodee give you; come in the dark and leavee. You *find;* that is no so badee."

"By George, you do seem to be hep to our little red hoodoo!" Hal cried, just as the rest of the party rode up to them.

"Next time have your medal approved by a board of censors before you try it out on your friends," advised David.

"I guess we'd better. It seems to be a deadly trinket," Hal humorously assured.

"What's stirring? What is that doo-dad you medalized and stuck in Gam's pocket?" George wanted to know. The faces of his companions reflected the inquiry.

"Oh, it's one of the things I found in the green bag. This particular bunch of beans had better be spilled now, Norton, instead of over the coffee."

"Go ahead, since you appear to have started something," Norton said. He was regarding Hal with an air of tolerant amusement.

"Tony knows all about it. He could have told you a few things. Why didn't you, Mejicano?"

"I had many other things to talk about." Antonio had preferred Hal to have the pleasure of telling of the stable incident. He knew how thoroughly Hal enjoyed "springing news upon the gang."

"Much obliged, *hermano*." Hal had instantly understood Tony's generous motive. "Well, gang, this is what happened at the stable, day before yesterday." He rapidly recounted the incident of the finding of the bag. "It got Pedro's goat. Now Gam has flown up in his own face. What's the answer?"

"*Quien sabe* [who knows]?" Tony made a gesture expressive of futility.

"Where is?" Gam suddenly asked, his voice still frightened.

"At the side of the road where you fired it," answered George satirically. "I'll go back and hunt it. Do you think it will killee me to pick it up?"

"No-ee," sighed Gam, then snickered faintly.

"That's more like it," approved Craig. "After the way you pitched into the Gray Cloaks up in Oregon I should think no one could throw a scare into you, Gam."

"No scaree me now—only littlee," Gam confessed. "I'fraid som'bodee leave sclarlet slign for Misser Hal. He don' know. Think is onlee fun. No-ee. Velly bad."

"*The scarlet sign!* Get that?" Hal sang out. "Gam has a few choice items in his brain that are missing from ours."

"What is the scarlet sign, Gam?" David flatly asked.

"Now you're getting down to brass tacks." Norton's remark was received by the "gang" with noisy concurrence.

"Me don' know *what* is," Gam pursed his lips and shook his head. "Me know is killee sign."

"Sweet little pet to have on hand," Hal blithely commented. "Who got up this gay red Chinese croak sign?"

"*No Chinese; no-ee.*" Gam's tone and accompanying head shake were more emphatic this time. "Chinese no like. They no makee. Som'bodee else makee. Me don' know where come. Me see one time in Portland, when me littlee boy. One Chinaman,

Wee Pin, dead. Police findee he; shotee in him heart. On the wall stickee with a nailee is sclarlet slign. Police thinkee slign is nossin. Thinkee Wee Pin put there. Chinese *know* it is the killee sign. They don' say nossin. One Chinaman, velly old, tellee me him see sclarlet slign in China when him is young. Him say, velly strong: '*Is no Chinese*'."

Gam finished telling what he knew of the scarlet sign just as George came up with the alleged trouble sign in his hand. "Here's the little Chinese Jonah, and George is still alive," he said, offering the red square to Hal. "You ought to wear it as a punishment. You keyed Gam up to concert pitch and almost put him in the nut class."

"You don't know what you're talking about. I'll prove that, *pronto*. This scarlet scarecrow isn't Chinese."

"What is it, then?" George demanded.

"I'll tell you some day," was Hal's vague promise, "after I find out about it myself."

"It's not in my line. I should say the bag, the pagoda, and this sign, maybe the mask, too, were Oriental," Norton said reflectively.

"I've traveled a good deal in the Orient," Craig interposed. "I may be able to tell something about the bag and the stuff in it.

Suppose you ride back now to Sweet Water for the bag, Hal. It won't take you long. Perhaps this sign belongs to a number of mixed breed Oriental criminals who are loose in this region. San Francisco is a hotbed of such fellows."

"But Gam says this sign was batting around China when an old fellow he knew was young," Hal reminded.

"Such bands of criminals, and such signs are carried on from father to son for generations," returned Craig.

"Then there's a chance for me to get myself in bad yet and have a little scarlet warning dizzied at my front doorstep." George looked hopeful.

"Look out that you don't wake up some morning to find a little crimson Jonah pasted on the coat of your pajamas," Kent warned.

"Or something might hit you, bing! in the middle of the back, like this." Hal gave George a resounding thump on the back. "Know you that you are the victim of the scarlet sign!" he declaimed dramatically.

"See here, you freshies, I'll warn you all not to think you can hand me any old kind of wallop and blame it on the scarlet sign," George remarked threateningly as he attempted to rub his back.

"Hey, there, Gam; to horse, to horse." Hal took Gam Fu by an arm and ran him over to where Sinbad was tranquilly lunching on the leaves of a clump of young, green saplings. In spite of Gam's fright at the sight of the strange scarlet sign, the Long Trail outfit were not very seriously concerned over it, or the green bag and Pedro's dark suspicions. They had faced real danger too many times to be alarmed now at what verged so closely upon superstition.

With Gam Fu in the saddle once more the riders started for Mariposa Ranch. It was nearing sunset and the outfit was ravenous. Craig's Chinese cook, Wen Yung, had been busy cooking all afternoon. "I'm going to give you a good plain dinner that you'll relish," was Craig's encouraging announcement as the outfit swarmed through the gates.

Chicken and rice with dumplings, half a dozen appetizing fresh vegetables, asparagus salad, pineapple sherbet, and chocolate pie kept the hungry crowd of trailers busy eating for a while. The boys made Gam sit at the table with them, although he objected strenuously to the honor. They put him through an unmerciful course of teasing with intent to erase from his mind the memory of the scarlet sign.

Gam Fu was bravely pretending no further interest in the sinister sign, though secretly he was worried. Hal had taken the scarlet sign, after it had been passed about among the outfit, and returned it to his pocket. The China boy wished uneasily that "Misser Hal" would lose the sign and never find it again. The very fact of its presence in his adored "fren's" pocket was disquieting to Gam.

CHAPTER V

"Get Up and Go Hiking"

"DON'T let Craig have a snatch at that." Hal bounced up to relieve Chang of the tea wagon, which the latter was placidly trundling into the library. On the top shelf of the wagon was a silver coffee service. On the second shelf were piled small fancy cakes and light pastry. The lower shelf held two or three opened boxes of cigars. These last were strictly for Norton and Craig's benefit. None of the Long Trail boys were smokers.

"Go as far as you like." Craig waved a hospitable hand.

"Watch me coffee up the outfit. It's easier than making biscuits, you'd better believe." Hal was quick to relieve Craig of a service that always bored the ranchman. He was a liberal provider, but hated both the preparation and the serving of meals. He was the only member of the outfit who could not cook.

"Speaking as man to man, over the brown

and peppy coffee berry, what's stirring?" Hal quizzed as he deftly poured the coffee, creamed and sugared it to individual taste, and handed it around the library table with much "josh." Norton sat at the head and Craig at the foot of the long table, with the boys ranged on the sides. "When do we blow, and where?" he continued. "Steady there. Steal your cake off the push cart, but don't tip over the wagon." He helped himself to a French cruller and looked genially about the table for an answer to his questions.

"Where do you want to go, Brent? You're the founder of this outfit. You've already doped out two good trips for us. I'd like to hear from you." Norton spoke with a hearty sincerity which made Hal turn red to the ears.

"*Righto, sure.*" His comrades added their loud approval.

"What kind of gush is this?" Hal refused to be praised. "You've made a mistake, Norton; I'm not the fellow. Good night." Hal jumped up as if he were about to bolt from the room.

"Whoa, boy!" George caught him by an arm.

"Unhand me, Bruno." Hal wriggled from George's grasp.

"What do you take me for, a bear, or a Saint Bernard?" George made a failure of trying to look indignant, his wide grin interfering as usual.

"Come on, Hal. What are your plans? We've one of our own, but we want to hear yours first." Craig and David exchanged smiles.

"Well, since you put it on that basis, I'll talk. I'm up a tree about where we'd have the most fun. I thought once I'd like to take a trip to southern California among the fruit ranches. But that's too civilized for us. We talked about it up in Oregon. Nothing stirring." Hal gave his head a vigorous shake. "A Mexican trip would be peppy; too peppy, the governor says. He's put a kibosh on the Mexican expedition till things simmer down across the border. There are still a few places to go on this side of the line. A trip across the Nevada line into Utah wouldn't be bad. There would be lots of rugged mountains to climb; good hunting; good fishing. We could go up the Columbia River on the Oregon side and come back on the Washington side."

"We'd either have to go to the trouble of shipping our burros, ponies, and supplies up there, or else buy straight through again, as

we did last summer," Norton said, not altogether approvingly. "We'd lose a certain amount of time, and—"

"Have a heart. Don't separate me from my friend Puff," George begged. "What's life in the woods without my little gray cayuse?"

A clamor of good-natured dissent arose from all but Craig and David. The Long Trail Boys were anxious to ride their own pet ponies on their summer adventures.

"I see where the Columbia River trip goes to the block." Hal raised a defensive hand, batting the air as though to clear away the chorus of objections. "That's about my layout at present. Something new may stir overnight. I wouldn't mind another trip in our own Nevada mountains. Some country!"

"Precisely my idea," Norton spoke rather eagerly. "I'm loyal to my own stamping ground."

"Anybody else have a suggestion?" Craig's eyes were full of dancing lights, though his lips were unsmiling.

"What's the joke?" George happened to intercept an amused glance which David had cast at Craig. He selected a fat, thickly iced chocolate cake from the tea wagon and politely offered it to David.

David accepted the cake and took a large bite from it. "Cinched," he remarked triumphantly, and finished the cake in two more bites. "For further information ask Craig."

"I will. I won't go to the trouble of picking out a cake for him, either. Politeness is wasted on this outfit."

"Ha-a-a-a!" The outfit. as one man, howled at George.

"Sh-h-h-h." He placed a finger to his lips. "Don't let everybody know the coat was a perfect fit. G'wan, you Craig! What's doing?" George suddenly turned on Craig with a savage growl. Craig's look of mild amazement sent the outfit into a fresh gale of laughter.

"You certainly don't seem to care how you talk to me," the ranchman commented tranquilly. "I'll say, if you want to know what *may* be doing, try that voice on me a few more times. This time, ask David."

"Stung again. Go ahead, Whit. This time you get no cake. I will protec the cake wagon with my life." George jumped up from his chair, grabbed the tea wagon, and pushed it a little way from the library table, placing himself in front of it in a spread-eagle posture.

"See here, what's all this?" Norton studied David's laughing features with affectionate attention. "What have you and Craig been keeping from me? I thought I noticed something suspicious going on yesterday. I wasn't sure."

"It's a shame to keep you guessing," laughed David. "All right. Get this. How would you fellows like a trip to Emerald Valley?"

"Hi-i-i-i, yi-i-i-i, hip, hip, hurray!" A tumult of yells broke loose.

"You've seen White Shadow," almost shouted Norton, pointing an excited finger at David. "Where you saw him is more than I can guess. I know it must have been out at the shack, or else on the way home from there."

The very name Emerald Valley carried its own pleasant significance to the Long Trail Boys. Emerald Valley was the secret home of White Shadow and Agunta, the Yaqui Indian chiefs with whom the outfit had sworn fellowship during their first trip in the Nevada mountains. Since that memorable summer of adventure the boys had seen White Shadow once, and Agunta not at all. White Shadow and Shy Beaver, a Navajo friend of Hal's,

had come to Sweet Water to visit the Brents for a few hours the previous September.

After White Shadow and his trained Indian scouts had cleared the Nevada mountains of a particularly lawless band of ruffians, the Long Trail Boys had been invited by the Yaqui chiefs to spend a while with them in the beautiful secret valley behind the waterfall. They would not have presumed to seek it of their own accord, though they knew the secret way of entrance into it.

The silver mine which White Shadow and his faithful group of Indians worked in the valley furnished the boys with a good reason for not intruding upon their Indian friends. Then, too, they could not be sure when they might find White Shadow at Emerald Valley. The two Yaqui chiefs devoted the proceeds of the silver mine to the cause of educating their own people in Mexico. In consequence, White Shadow and Agunta were frequently in Mexico for two or three months at a time. White Shadow was also a noted secret service scout.

David's question had told its own story. Not only had he seen White Shadow, but more than that the outfit had been invited by the chief to Emerald Valley. That meant

not only the pleasure of living in the secret valley itself, but also the sport of ranging the surrounding mountains on hunting trips with White Shadow himself who was known among his men as "a mighty hunter."

"How does it happen that you saw White Shadow and I didn't?" Norton was still looking mystified. "I thought I was with you fellows most of the time while we were at the shack. I certainly was, both going and coming back."

"Craig and I met him down the trail below the shack. You were busy with Blue Wolf in the morning, you'll remember, and we took a ride. We crossed his trail about two miles below the shack. He had on a sombrero. It was pulled low over his face so we couldn't see his hair at all. We knew him, though. There's only one White Shadow." David expressed his admiration of the Yaqui chief in tone. "Maybe he wasn't glad to see *us!* He'd just come back from a trip to the border where he had gone with a silver convoy."

"We wanted him to come up to the shack, but he was in a hurry and said—" Craig stopped. "Give the Little Father White Shadow's message, Davy."

"When the moon is large again, meet the

Little Father and our brothers at Cascade Canyon. Then bring our brothers to Emerald Valley," David repeated.

"We were going to tell you as soon as we went back to the shack. Then Davy proposed to keep it dark and surprise you and the gang at the same time," Craig explained.

"You couldn't have told me anything that would please me better," Norton said heartily. "That mountain country around Emerald Valley is the wildest in Nevada. After all, it's the wilderness we're looking for, rather than a change into one of the other states."

"It will be almost four weeks until the moon is full." Kent had been industriously consulting a combined pocket calendar and almanac. "The sooner we start the better, anyway. If we reach Cascade Canyon too early, we can find enough to keep us out of mischief."

"It will take us some time to reach the canyon at the rate we travel, two or three weeks, I'd say, and allow time enough for poking along the way a little. It's fortunate Kent got here a week earlier than we'd expected him to come. I hate to be hurried on a trip. It takes all the pep out of it."

"So do I. I'd rather hurry now and lope lazily along afterward," declared Hal. "Think we can scramble our stuff together in two days? We've everything we'll need on hand except food supplies. One trip to High Ledge will fix that end of things."

"Yes, we can do it. Tomorrow is Tuesday, We'll try to be ready to pull out on Thursday morning." Norton's voice held the same eager note as Hal's. He was no less a boy at heart than his younger comrades. "Before we settle things positively, is everybody satisfied? Is there any other trip you would rather take?"

A deafening chorus of approbation answered him. Kent sprang to his feet, flourished his arms, and shouted: "Who are we? Who are we? Who are we?"

"We are, we are, we are the Long Trail Boys!" Three times the glad call rent the air, louder with each repetition.

The rollicking waves of noisy rejoicing had hardly died out when Hal began to march up and down the room singing a composition of his own to the tune of "Get out and get under." He had put it together a line or two at a time, intending it for use "when the gang gets together again." He was now putting

his whole gleeful force into a spirited rendition of his lively new song:

"Get up and go hiking:
It's time to go piking,
When life on the ranch's too slow.
The outfit is aching,
New trails to be breaking,
At sun-up we're going to go.
Ride the mountains, clippety-clop;
Hit the high spots; don't take a drop:
It's time to be piking,
Get up and go hiking,
The Long Trail Boys are due to blow."

CHAPTER VI

The Face at the Window

HAL was permitted to sing only a part of his new song alone. The swing of the cheerful doggerel caught the ears of his chums before he had sung it half through. They joined in with him, coming out strongly on the last three lines. Very obligingly he repeated it, not once, but half a dozen times. It proved so inspiring that Norton and Craig grinned half apologetically to each other, then joined the exuberant line of boys, marching up and down the long room and around the table, singing Hal's new song. Even Gam Fu was singing, though only Gam himself knew what he sang.

"That's a peacherino, jim-daisy of a yowl," was George's delicate appreciation of Hal's song. "I like it almost as well as if I'd made it up myself."

"Then it must be good," Hal hurled back.

After at least ten vigorous renderings of the "yowl" the choristers dropped out of the chorus, one by one, until none was singing.

"Ten minutes intermission, while the chorus gets its breath. We'll let the yowl loose again after a while," Kent said with deep satisfaction.

"You fellows had better get busy and help make up the supply lists," Norton advised. "Clean up that part of the business tonight. It means time saved. Pile those cups and saucers on the tea cart and clear the deck for action."

Gam swooped down upon the cups and saucers, delighted to find something to do within his particular ken. Norton went fishing in a drawer of the table and found a pad of white paper and a fountain pen. "Now we'll do a little real work," he said briskly. He commenced at once, in his accurate, methodical manner, to compile a general list of articles needed for the trip. Tony, Kent, Craig and David settled themselves seriously to help the guide. George took occasion to tease Gam Fu by telling the China boy that he himself might take entire charge of the cooking on the trip so that Gam could then rest and enjoy himself. Gam dropped a coffee cup, bumped the tea wagon against Craig, and nearly turned inside out with distress at such a prospect.

Hal had gone out to the dining room where he had left the green knapsack hanging by its strap on the back of his chair. He had whisked home on Starlight for it and had returned just as the party were sitting down to dinner. At that time he had been too hungry to bother exhibiting it, and had hung it on his chair back for the time being. Gam Fu's terror of the scarlet sign had prompted Hal not to spoil the China boy's pleasure in his dinner by referring to the odd knapsack.

He returned to the living room with the green knapsack slung across one shoulder, strolled to the table where his comrades were deep in the compilation of the lists, and stood for a moment or two peering idly over Norton's shoulder at the long, ever-growing list. Hal was not popular with Norton when it came to teamwork on a list. He invariably inspired a noisy merriment which prevented progress.

"Have some mercy on my esteemed 'fren'," he jokingly told George who was still teasing Gam. Crossing the room he plumped himself down in a deep padded chair to wait until Norton finished the compiling of the lists. He had decided that, while the outfit was still at the table, he would show them the knapsack and its strange contents.

"Your esteemed 'fren' doesn't know when he's well off," George flung back, making a reproving face at Gam. "You ought to be helping Norton instead of trying to call me down."

Instead of answering, Hal drew his handkerchief very deliberately from his coat pocket and flapped it derisively at George. With his handkerchief, unnoticed by either himself or George, came the little scarlet square. It dropped almost under the armchair.

Thawck! A hard ball of paper, unerringly aimed, caught Hal in the middle of the forehead.

"Oh, you will, will you?" Hal whizzed the paper ball at George who was deceitfully gazing in an opposite direction from his chum. George neatly dodged the ball. It zipped past him and struck the library table squarely in front of the guide.

"Glad you two loafers have found something to do," Kent jeered.

"Don't let us worry you," was Hal's pleasant satire. "If Boss Norton would hurry up and write a little faster, I'd show off the mysterious knapsack, and not charge an admission tax."

"By George, Hal, I'd forgotten all about

that green bag business." Norton took his eyes from the list with an expression of keen interest. "This general list is O.K. now, and Craig has made up the medical and extra supply lists. Bring out Exhibit A," he said jocosely.

"Here's where I have my inning." Hal hustled briskly forward, slipping the green knapsack from his shoulder. "I may not be a star at helping the bosses, but I'm a great little showman. Watch me." He slipped into his own vacant place at the table and began emptying the bag of its contents. Very quickly the ivory pagoda, the mask, the piece of silk, the revolver cartridges, and the bag itself lay in a row on the middle of the table.

"There you are." He rose and brandished his arms grandly over the exhibit. "You have before you, gentlemen, a rare bunch of truck that has strayed away from its owner. The owner, gentlemen, probably hasn't the nerve—See here, pay attention to me first," Hal pounded his chest, "and the exhibit next." The boys were already exclaiming over the ivory pagoda. "That means you, Norton," he said as he threw a laughing glance to the guide at the head of the table. Involuntarily his

eyes strayed past Norton to a window directly behind him at the east end of the room. His arms dropped. Startled amazement routed laughter. Through the window glass a face was peering steadily into the living room.

It was a pale brown face, rather long, with tense scarlet lips and great, flashing, black eyes. The nose was long and straight. Black hair straggled thickly over the low forehead and almost down into the somber black eyes. The expression of the wild, dark face through the window was one of still, deadly hatred; the hatred which endures to the end against persons or objects. The black eyes were not fastened upon the company of men around the table. The intruder's whole attention was riveted upon the little collection of objects which comprised "Exhibit A."

"Great guns! What's broken loose?" not Hal, but Craig cried out. Seated at the foot of the table he, too, had seen the wild, fierce-eyed face. For a fleeting instant his eyes met those of the hate-filled pair outside the window. Then the face disappeared.

CHAPTER VII

A Shot in the Dark

"ATTABOY!" Hal made a dive for the window at which the face had shown itself. How long its possessor had been posted outside the window he could not know. Momentarily startled, his usual reckless valor had reasserted itself.

"Did you get a look at that thing?" Craig asked Norton excitedly. "It was a hair raiser."

"Wish I'd seen it." Norton had joined the rush which Hal had headed. "I don't know what I'm chasing, but I'll go with the gang."

At the window Hal was wrestling with the lower sash, but it stuck.

"*Venga* [come on]!" Antonio rallied. He and Kent were immediately behind Hal.

"What's up?" Kent trod on Hal's heels as the latter succeeded in raising the lower sash. Over the sill he went, Kent following. The window was one of a row of four which opened from the living room on to a side veranda.

"Foxy guy. He picked that last window

in the row because it had no screen. He could see through glass better than through wire netting and he could drop off the porch right there." Hal and Kent had paused for an instant on the veranda. "You go that way; I'll go this. If you slam-bang against a hobgoblin with black hair and a face like a Hallowe'en mask, that's it."

Hal darted off to the left, skirting a row of tall rose bushes which graced the side lawn. Kent raced to the right, with a very vague idea of what he was hunting, but a very determined resolve to tackle anything he might see which would answer to Hal's excited description.

The rest of the outfit were now leaping from the veranda to the lawn. Craig was talking loudly; Gam's treble was now keyed to staccato heights.

"Yes, it was human," Craig was saying. "All joking aside, it was a man's head I saw at the window. He must have been kneeling in front of it for his head didn't come as high as the upper part of the lower pane. Can't recall how he was dressed. I mean, whether in light or dark clothes. Such a face!" Craig made a gesture of repulsion. "That half-breed, Metanzo, who White Shadow

downed in the mountains, was tame looking beside this creature."

"Me see. Me no likee meet he on a dlark night," Gam declared, his sharp eyes roving from point to point on the lawn. The summer darkness lay dense and mysterious beyond the radiance of the porch lights which Craig had switched on.

Suddenly from four points scattered about the large lawn powerful white lights streamed out, filling the lawn with a clear, bright illumination. Craig had hurriedly switched on the arc lights as an aid to discovering the unwelcome visitant. The Long Trailers separated, running in all directions.

"There he goes." George started at a dead run toward a figure that he saw dodging in and out among the bushes. "R-rats!" his comrades heard him shout disgustedly, "only you."

"Better than the freak I saw. Oh, confound it! How I wish Craig had blinked on the juice about three minutes sooner!" Hal made a gesture of defeat. "I am sure I caught a glimpse of some one moving along away down at the lower end of the lot where it's a little bit open. Then on came the lights, and nothing doing. It's easy to make

a get-away on this ranch with a bunch of hills at the back door."

"Craig saw it at the window—whatever it was," George said. "Gam saw it, too. The rest of us didn't get a look at it. Say, Gam is pretty game, isn't he? He got over that scarlet sign hoodoo fine. He showed pep about seeing this unknown chromo, too."

"Gam has nerve." Hal wagged his head. "I wanted to talk about that blamed red trinket to the gang, but didn't like to stir him up again about it. We might as well blow back to the house. I'm sure I saw friend freak make his get-away."

"Where's Kent?" Norton asked as George and Hal joined the others at the beginning of the row of rose bushes. From this point the party could command a clear view of the lawn. One by one they had gathered there after their quick search of the lawns.

"Search me. He was right behind me going through the window. After that he went one way; I went the other. Oh, foddle! Probably I saw him down there on the lawn instead of Freako, the Missing Member." Hal showed further deep disgust.

"A good name, Brent." Craig smiled half grimly. "You got the same impression of the

creature as I. How in thunder he got away so fast is a mystery. You didn't waste any time going after him."

"A freak half-breed, I'll say. You know what those fellows can do—Tie themselves up in a knot, do a snake crawl, walk without legs, and close up like a folder. This fellow was probably good sized, with a useful pair of stalks to buzz him over the ground."

"Er-her-r! He might have been merely an innocent aborigine," George took on a pompous, scientific tone, "who, attracted by the dazzle of our brightly lighted domicile, ventured to creep humbly to the window under the sad, mistaken impression that his simple, trusting soul would be gladdened by the sight of some one civilized. What a mistake he made! He—"

"See here, George, that's altogether too rough on the crowd. Let me set you straight, *pronto*. Freako," Craig had adopted Hal's name for the unprepossessing prowler, "was no simple, trusting soul. I never saw a more villainous looking face."

"There's Kent, over by the fountain," David sang out. "By George, he's holding a handkerchief to his face. *He's* got into something." David's tones expressed his own regret at not having been in the "scrap."

"What happened to you, Kent?" Tony ran forward to meet Kent. The arc light showed blood on the handkerchief Kent was holding.

"Pinged." Kent took the handkerchief from his left cheek, revealing a shallow, bleeding furrow just under the left cheek bone. "I didn't get a little scarlet warning beforehand. I got a bullet right out of a gun that had lost its voice."

CHAPTER VIII

A Double Trouble Sign

"INTO the house with you, where I can cleanse that dig and plaster it," ordered Craig.

The Long Trailers followed Craig and Kent into the house by the front door, returning to the living room. There Craig set briskly to work on Kent's wound. It was superficial, hardly deeper than a ragged cut. While he worked, hubbub reigned. The boys shouted questions at Kent, going on to others before he could answer the first eager inquiries.

"Cut out the racket," he finally told his pals. "This is what happened after I left Hal. I went around to the front of the house. Just as I stepped front I saw a dog running along the east side of the lawn. I started for it. Ping! Something hit my cheek, but I didn't hear a gun pop. I knew some one besides the dog had sniped me, so I stopped for about a second, trying to locate the fellow with the hush gun. I was going to land on him, if I found him. Then Craig switched

on the lights. From behind a bush up jumped a fellow taller than Tony. I thought he was coming for me, and got ready for him. Instead he started off after the dog, which was then almost as far down as the east hedge. He picked up the dog and went over that high hedge with it like a bird. I never saw a man run faster or make a better jump. I guess he must have doubled and run, afterward keeping himself screened by the hedge till he struck the east pony pasture. He was in sight only about two minutes. He got out of the light range *pronto*. No use trying to follow him. He was a sprinter."

"Surprised you didn't chase him clear to the foothills before you stopped to think." Norton's good-humored smile took away all unpleasant meaning from the dig he gave Kent.

Kent merely grinned. "This fellow must have been the one under the window," he said. "He knew how to double up like a jackknife."

"Maybe the dog looked in the window," was David's jesting surmise.

"I'd know Freako anywhere," Hal insisted with satirical warmth. "Come to think of it, he may be a nut who's lost connections

with a nut ranch, or a side show. He and Fido may have cleared out and left the rest of the nuts far behind."

"I'm inclined to that opinion myself, but a Maxim silencer on a revolver doesn't smack of a lunatic," commented Norton. "His hitting you in the dark, Kent, was just a bit of luck for him. I'll say the fellow was a good woodsman, though. He knew how to aim in the dark. Better have some of your men go over the ranch tomorrow, Craig, and make a report of things to you before we start on the trail," he advised Craig. "You never can tell what's back of a deal like this."

"Wherever *this* gang is, there's sure to be plenty of commotion," declared George importantly. "We revel in freak rubber necks, hush guns, scarlet signs—"

"Jumping Jupiter! What a bunch of geese we are! Excuse me, gang, but it's true. I've got the right dope about Freako. He owns Exhibit A. He was hanging around the place after it. That's why he was looking so murderous. He must have seen it on the table." Hal brought one hand down over the other with an emphatic smack.

"You're right, Hal," Craig said instantly. "He was looking past me at the table when I

caught my first glimpse of him. Our eyes happened to meet, and he gave me a venomous look."

"We've got his number." Hal turned triumphantly to Craig. "First, the knapsack belongs to him. Second, he's a rustler, and was after Serapis. Third, he thought the knapsack was in the house and was trying to get a line on the inside. Fourth, he's the tall fellow with the hush gun who pinged Kent. Fifth, he must have folded up like a Chinese lantern at the window."

"How was he dressed? I mean, as much as you could see of him at the window?" questioned Antonio. "Had he the riding coat on, or the flannel shirt, open at the throat? Or had he the collar and tie? Señor Craig says he can remember nothing of the way this one was dressed."

"Neither can I. Wait a minute. Let me think." Hal's dark brows drew together. He stood still and concentrated in an earnest effort to recall the exact appearance of the prowler as far as he could. "I can't remember a thing about his clothes," he said shaking his head. "I'll show you the way he was at the window." Hal went over to the open window and climbed out of it. He pulled

down the sash, then crouched under the window, raising his body to the height of that of the intruder as he had seen him. He ended with a series of ridiculous faces at his pals through the glass.

"Christopher Columbus!" Hal had raised the window again and was preparing to come over the sill when the cry broke from him. The boys saw him holding up the scarlet sign with one hand while he rummaged a pocket with the other. "Here's little crimson Jonah outside on the veranda!" he called.

"*Caramba* [Great Scott]! Has another scarlet sign been left for us?" cried Antonio.

"Not yet, Mejicano." Hal poked a smiling head in the window. "This is Hal's own precious little plaything that dropped out of his pocket when he flew over the sill like a bird. Think what I might have lost!" He gaily pocketed the supposed hoodoo again and swung his long legs over the sill. "We'll now go on with the show," he announced, going over to the table. "All I lack is Freako's dog and hush gun. He'll never dare come to the front door now to inquire for his stuff."

"I intend to put four-ranch police in charge here before I leave Mariposa," Hartwell Craig said with decision. "Serapis goes with me,

but I have my other thoroughbreds to think of. I don't keep enough money in my small safe to make it worth cracking. Most of my valuable silver and decorative stuff is in my Carson City house. Still, I don't fancy the idea of having Mariposa looted by bandits."

As he talked, Craig had been minutely examining the carved ivory pagoda. "This is a wonderful curio, Hal," he declared with admiration. "It may be worth a couple of thousand dollars on account of the carving, the ivory, and the rubies. They're true pigeon-blood stones. If it's a relic, it may be worth many thousands. What are you going to do with it?"

"Search me," Hal looked comically nonplussed. "I don't want Freako's talisman. I'm positive it's his. Probably he stole it, but why should Hal follow his bright example? Just the same, he'll have to apply at the front door for it, if he wants it. I haven't his address."

"Bad medicine." Norton was shaking his head over the rest of the articles on the table. "The mask is a dead give away. So's the piece of silk. That's a bandit wrinkle. Across the border, years ago, bandits used to throw the scarf. They would slip up behind

a man and tie up his head, quick as wink, then they'd rob him, and turn him loose with his head muffled and hands tied behind him. More likely than not, they'd shoot him in the back. It looks as though such barbarism was still popular."

Hal was staring in frowning fascination at the scarf which Norton had opened out. "I thought it was a big hanky," he said. Suddenly he uttered a sharp: "By gracious, I know now how Freako was togged. He had a scarf like this draped over his neck and shoulders. He was all black but his face. That's why we couldn't remember anything about him, Craig and Gam, but his ugly face. Righto, Craig?"

"Right again. You saw more than I did," Craig replied.

"Me see allee black, too." Gam further bore out Hal's surmise.

"This business needs police attention," Norton said crisply. "You'd better turn that stuff over to the sheriff of this county and let him send a posse out after this freak outlaw. That's my opinion of him, judging him by his belongings and his evening's performance."

"Maybe I will, later. Not yet." There

was an obstinate note in Hal's voice. "Don't start kiboshing, Norton. I want Clarke Hamden to be the first one to see Exhibit A when he comes to Sweet Water the last of August." Clarke Hamden was a special government detective with whom Hal had formed a warm friendship in Oregon the previous summer.

"Suit yourself." Norton shrugged his broad shoulders. "Hope you don't intend to take it with you, trailing. Freako's dog might scent Freako's belongings. Then we'd have 'em both on our trail. Little scarlet Jonah might turn out to be a sure-enough killee sign."

"Oh, Freako may make good and ring the door bell," Hal returned optimistically. "If he doesn't, how about letting White Shadow have a look at Exhibit A?" Hal grinned ingratiatingly.

"I wash my hands of you," Norton replied, laughing half vexedly. "I think I'd better write Freako a note and urge him to come and get it. You'll have enough to carry on the trail without taking along that useless addition." He pointed to Exhibit A.

"I think I'd better throw the scarf." Hal had taken the piece of black silk from Norton

and was occupying himself in trying to drape it over his neck and shoulders in imitation of Freako. He took a threatening step toward the guide, then they both laughed.

Standing not far from Hal and Norton, Gam Fu watched them, an expression of anxiety on his moon face. He had something in his pocket which did not properly belong there. He had seen the little scarlet square drop to the floor when, earlier in the evening, Hal had pulled it from a coat pocket with his handkerchief.

When the rush to the window came, Gam had hastily snatched up the scarlet square from the rug and tucked it away in one of his own pockets. He knew, though Hal did not, that there were now two scarlet signs among them, exactly alike. One of them Hal had merely found in the green bag. The other—it had been left purposely outside the window by the man whose dark, cruel face had been seen staring through the glass into the room.

On finding the first square Gam had resolved to put it in the kitchen range, thus, according to an old Chinese custom, burning up any misfortune that might be hovering over Misser Hal. He had not intended to take

his "esteemed fren" into his confidence. Now Misser Hal would have to be told. Gam would have to return the square to him, telling him where he had found it. Misser Hal would have to be on his guard. Gam was of the gloomy opinion that the "killee sign" had been left on the veranda under the window on purpose for Misser Hal.

CHAPTER IX

A Message to "Freako"

THE continued ringing of the telephone bell next morning at twenty minutes past five awoke Hal ten minutes sooner than his usual rising hour. He reached out sleepily for the phone on the stand beside the bed with a widely yawning "Hello."

Craig's voice at the other end of the line quickly completed the waking-up process. Hal grew instantly on the alert as he heard Craig say: "I wish you'd come over to Mariposa as soon as you can, Brent. I've something to show you. Don't wait for breakfast. It's ready here."

"Yours cordially. On the way in ten minutes. Bye." A long leap out of bed carried Hal to the door of his own bath. Three minutes under the shower, two to dry off, four to throw on his clothing and one to gallop down stairs and out of the house toward the stable verified Hal's promise to Craig. He did not stop to saddle Silverheels,

but rode the pony bareback down the drive and through the gateway like a young Indian.

Hal was confident that whatever Craig had to show him was something in connection with the scarlet sign. Gam Fu had raised a lively commotion before the breaking up of Hal's surprise party on the previous evening by producing the scarlet square he had pocketed.

The China boy's distressed opinion that the scarlet sign was especially meant for Hal was received by Hal with good-humored derision. Gam sturdily stuck to his theory that the bandit must have either seen Hal with the green knapsack at the stable when he had shown it and its contents to Pedro and Tony, or else had seen him with it when he brought it to Mariposa.

Gam's theories brought forth numerous other surmises and opinions from the rest of the outfit. For an hour before the party broke up discussion ran high. Craig and Norton were both impatient with Gam's superstitious dread of the scarlet sign. "I don't doubt, Gam, that this red sign is old as the hills and has been used as a murder sign," Craig told the China boy, "but this fellow Freako probably doesn't know its true history."

"Then where he getee?" Gam had asked, unconvinced.

"Perhaps he robbed another outlaw who carried some of them; a cutthroat maybe, who belonged to the snaky order of the killee bunch. I daresay Freako knows it only as bad medicine and good scare dope," Craig had answered.

All Hal could think of as Silverheels rushed him toward Mariposa was that "Freako had blown back and started something." He could hardly wait to hear what that something was. The instant he came in sight of the ranch house he began hallooing to the three figures he saw standing on the front veranda. Their backs were toward him when he sent up his first piercing call. They turned simultaneously and waved to him.

"Stick by, Silver; nice boy. Go eat up Craig's lawn. No go away." Hal shook a commanding finger at the pony. Stopping only to give Silverheels his orders, he covered the short distance between himself and the porch party at a loping run. "What's doing?" was his excited salutation.

"Help yourself." David made room for Hal between himself and Norton. Craig was standing at the guide's other side. The eyes

of the three men had turned from Hal back again to the middle panel of the heavy oak front door.

Hal's lips puckered in a shrill whistle. Pinned on the door panel with a small-sized, razor-edged bowie knife was a scarlet square. It had a white paper background upon which a message had been scrawled in red ink. His comrades looked on in silence as Hal bent forward to read the red script: "Place what is mine on the right-hand gate post tonight. The scarlet sign spares not its enemies."

"Sorry I can't see it, old side-show chum," was Hal's flippant reception of the sinister message. "Orders are orders. Misser Hal says you'll have to come to the front door and prove your claim to Exhibit A. You should have applied at the Mariposa Lost and Found the day after your stable flivver. I might have let you off easy and sent you away happy. Since then I've found out so many little things about you—" Hal broke off with a rollicking laugh. "Come and get it, Freako. What does he take us for?" He blew a contemptuous breath that fluttered the white paper a little on the strange door embellishment.

"It's a case of the biter bit," laughed

Norton. "No doubt the rascal was after your new horse, Craig. And he lost his own valuables. If I were you, I'd answer this scrawl with a few words of straight talk. Then I'd stick the answer and this confounded red hoodoo on the gate post tonight before dark. No waiting till eleven to oblige Freako with a target."

"Oh, let me write to Freako," begged Hal.

"You'd have to kid him," Norton objected. "This note to him must be strong enough to sink into his brain and make him understand he's not dealing with a crowd of schoolboys."

"I can fix him," Hal said confidently. "Treat me to breakfast. Then watch my speed. What cheer?"

"Browned hash and hot waffles," returned Craig. "That's what we had. You can—" Hal had already bolted for the dining room.

After breakfast he shut himself up in the library and spent a busy half hour composing replies to Freako. As fast as he wrote them he threw them aside. Finally he evolved one that appeared to please him. He copied it on a fresh piece of type paper and hustled with it to the living room in which Craig and Norton had already begun to pile up the supplies for the trip.

"How's this?" he said as he burst in upon the two men. "After August 22, definite information regarding a green strap knapsack, found under suspicious circumstances on the premises of Hartwell Craig, Mariposa Ranch, may be obtained by applying to Clarke Hamden, Special Government Detective, Sweet Water Ranch, Nevada. Prior to August 22, no information regarding the aforesaid green knapsack will be given out. The bag will be placed in safe-keeping, pending the judgment of Detective Hamden."

Hal gave a delighted chuckle. "I'll say that'll be a worse scare on Freako than the scarlet sign was on Gam. Hamden's internationally known. He's a terror to criminals."

"Pretty fair for a first attempt at seriousness," Norton made joking admission.

"Good work," Craig approved. "Hand it back to the blamed rustler along with his knife and his red bluff. You'd better leave the bag in my safe until you come back from our trip, Hal. The ranch will be under police protection. Besides, the burglar alarm will be set every night while I'm gone. I'd like to see the thug that could get by it."

"I'll do it." Hal instantly accepted the offer.

"I'd leave Exhibit B for Kent, Tony and George to see, but Freako picked too public a spot for his show." Craig pulled the knife from the door, handing the scarlet square and the paper to Hal. "Sign number three," he said.

"And Harold Brent is living yet!" Hal spun around on his toes, raised an arm high above his head and posed gracefully.

"See that you prolong life by putting Exhibit B on the gate post before dark," cautioned the guide. "Between seven and eight, while there's still some light, is late enough. One minute after dark's *too late.* Remember that. The fellow showed Kent what he could do last night."

"It's never late till twelve o'clock, and after that it's early." Hal's blithe quotation and air of happy innocence did not deceive Norton. "He didn't show *me* what he could do, Norton. Bing! on the gate post goes Exhibit B, before dark," Hal pounded one closed hand down upon the other. "But have a heart! I'm going to be somewhere near that gate post at eleven to-night, if I can find cover. If I can't find it any other way, I may put on that suit of armor in your hall and walk down to meet my friend Freako. I've just got to see him."

CHAPTER X

"How!"

"Get up and go hiking,
It's time to go piking
When life on the ranch 's too slow."

KENT hummed the foregoing lines to the accompaniment of Silverheels' ringing hoofs on the stretch of hard-packed trail the outfit had struck late that afternoon.

"It's a great life if you bring your own grub." Hal snatched at the leaves of a low-hanging tree as he rode past it. Starlight immediately turned his head in bright expectation of receiving the handful of tender green leaves. "Can't fool you, old Star, can I?" Starlight got the handful of leaves and crunched them enjoyingly. "You can find your grub, coming or going. Now I'll treat Silver."

"You needn't. I'll treat him myself." Kent hastily stripped a tree branch in order to give Silverheels a feast.

Hal had insisted that Kent should ride Silverheels during the trip. Though he was attached to Spice, Kent knew Silverheels to

be the finer horse. "I can't ride both my ponies at once, but I'd like to give 'em both a good time. I'm thinking more of them than I am of you," Hal had laughingly told Kent. "Let Gam ride Spice. Sinbad's too fat to take on our kind of trip. It's time that Chinese wonder learned to stay on a peppy horse."

It was now late Thursday afternoon, and the outfit had been on the move since six o'clock that morning. As in the instance of their first trip into the wilds two years before, the merry expedition had started from Sweet Water Ranch with Mr. and Mrs. Brent on the veranda to see them off and the servants of the Brent household nodding and smiling good-byes from lawn, doors, and windows.

"If we didn't have to chase the burros along we could go zipping over the world in great style," Hal grumbled. He and Kent were taking their turns at burro duty, which consisted in bringing up the rear of the procession and minding the burros.

"We'd be worse off if we had to tote what the burros do," Kent said cheerfully.

"Would we? I'll say! There is wisdom in your ravings, *amigo*."

"We're within a mile of Jewel Falls, fel-

lows!" David had dropped back from the group of riders traveling ahead of the burros to call out the welcome news to the burro tenders.

"Toss up a few cheers." Hal showed his teeth affably. "It's time we were within a mile of some large body of drinking water. We've not passed a spring for a long while."

"What was the matter with the spring where we stopped to eat lunch. It wasn't chained to the rocks. Didn't you ever hear of a water bottle?"

"I almost lapped that trickle in the rock dry. You ask too many questions. Cut 'em out if you're thinking of staying back here with me and the burros. This one's a trained burro. His name's Kent. You may like him—"

"No, siree, I took my burro turn this morning. *Adios.*" David cleverly turned his pony on the matted green slope above the rough trail and galloped back to the head of the cavalcade.

"Nice opinion you have of your old college chum," Kent said, laughing in his sunny fashion.

"It might be worse," Hal returned hopefully. "Oh, gee! I'm glad we're started on

our way at last. Norton says Jewel Falls is a peachy place to camp. Remember our first Nevada trip? We're going to Cascade Canyon now by a longer route. The other time we really started up the mountains from Norton's shack."

"I'll never forget a single thing about that first trip. It was a hummer," Kent said with hearty reminiscence. "Norton's glad to hit the trail again. He likes his old Nevada stamping ground."

"You bet he does. So do all of us," Hal agreed warmly.

Deeply absorbed in conversation, the two boys rode slowly along behind the burros. Since Kent's arrival at Sweet Water Ranch this was the first opportunity they had had for a lengthy talk.

"Look," Kent finally exclaimed, pointing to the west. "The sun is all rolled up for a slide down the sky. It must be after six." He looked at his wrist watch. "Yes; it's ten after six."

"I hear a waterfall roaring somewhere." Hal's acute ears had caught the musical splash and rush of cascading water. Just then the riders ahead swept around a curve of the trail and in sight of Jewel Falls. A moment

or two later Hal and Kent were in sight of it, too.

A shout of approbation awoke the echoes as the Long Trail Boys glimpsed Norton's choice of camp. It was a grassy, tree-guarded dell situated at the base of a fairly high mountain. At the back of the dell and against the mountain side Jewel Falls tumbled down in three white sparkling cascades over a jagged formation of rock.

They were three gurgling happy little cascades, throwing themselves noisily over the rocks and into a natural basin which formed part of a small mountain stream. It babbled tunefully along the base of the mountain, winding away among the trees like a silver ribbon.

"All ready for the opening chorus!" Hal made a flying leap from Starlight's back and ran forward to the center of the grassy dell. He raised both arms high and his voice higher in an ear-splitting "We're here, because we're here."

The outfit joined in the singing with uproarious vigor. Craig and Norton yelled as lustily as their companions, each appearing to be delighted with the volume of noise he had discovered he could make, while Kent wound

up the singing by starting the Long Trail Boys' yell. It was given half a dozen times with a will.

"Guess that will do for a starter," Norton declared. "Now let's get busy while the light lasts. That won't be long, either. No bough beds to-night. Every fellow roll up in his blanket, but don't roll up too near that basin, or, splash, something'll drop into the water."

"No much cookee tonlight," was Gam's cheerful remark as he busied himself with unloading the burro that carried the majority of the cooking utensils. "Me makee cloffee qlickee. Plentee eats in sluit clasee, from Sleet Watee. You helpee me, bling som' woodee?" He addressed the party in general in a pleasant cooing tone. "Comee dlark plitty qlick."

"We'll build the fire, Gam," Kent assured the China boy, which was the answer Gam wanted. "You keep on unloading the burro. Who's going to do the wood snatching act?" he asked the others.

"All of us except Boss Norton and Boss Craig. I wouldn't dare hand *them* any orders." Hal's smile was not especially respectful.

"Don't bother me with any orders. I'm

going to give this camp site the once-over. Boss Craig can help you lug wood. Go to it while you can see," the guide advised with humorous stress as he started off on his own detail.

"I saw much dry wood over there as we passed." Antonio pointed down the trail over which they had come. "*Vamos.* We must hurry."

"Look out for rattlers," warned Craig. "Remember, they hang around the outer edge of thickets, or in among the rocks." He shouted this to the boys as he ran with them out of the dell. While it was yet fairly light it would undoubtedly be dusky by the time they would finish bringing up the wood.

The Long Trailers attacked the job with their usual spirited energy. They soon came back to camp, one after another, staggering under as much wood as they could carry, dropping it only to dash down the trail again for more. Thickening twilight found Gam Fu boiling coffee over a ruddy blaze, while wood enough for an all-evening camp fire was stacked near by.

Norton in the meantime had gone over every foot of the camp site, his keen eyes missing nothing. The dell itself was well

inclosed by tall cottonwoods and larches. It was an old favorite of his among the many Nevada camping sites he had known. He could recall many nights of free life under the open sky when he had rolled up in a blanket under those same cottonwoods and slept dreamlessly until morning. In the matter of looking it over thoroughly, however, the guide proceeded on the wise basis of never having seen it before. He took the greatest pains to explore it carefully.

Breakfast that morning had been eaten at five-thirty in the kitchen of Sweet Water. Gam Fu had packed food enough to last the first day out in two large bamboo suit cases. He had tied the handles of the suit cases with a piece of stout rope and slung the rope across Spice's back. By half past ten that morning the boys had greatly lightened the indignant pony's burden, for they came singly or in pairs, begging a "hand out" from soft-hearted Gam until he gigglingly refused to let them have anything more to eat until lunch.

He had managed to keep the contents of one of the suit cases intact until supper time. Then the ravenous outfit fell over one another and the chuckling cook at his shrill call of

"Comee getee." They threw themselves down in an irregular circle on the grass there to meet with a surprise. The China boy treated them to a delicatessen meal of cold roasted and spiced meats, fresh graham gems, olives, pickles, cheese, potato chips, and stuffed walnuts and dates. He crowned the spread with a large strawberry shortcake of his own making, for which he had brought the cream in a separate bottle.

"You're a priceless gem, Gam. Don't ever forget that you're tied to this outfit for life," Hal told the China boy as later he lay lazily before the camp fire watching Gam busily sorting and arranging cooking supplies in the suit cases. Supper over, the campers were following their usual custom of lounging about the fire.

"Me no forgetee nossin," was Gam's sturdy response. He regarded Hal for an instant with a serious air, then dropped his eyes to his self-appointed task.

"All right. Don't cry about it, either," Hal further lightly advised. The others listened to Hal's injunction with smiles.

"He, he, he." Gam's infectious chuckle urged the listeners' smiles into a wave of ready laughter. "Me no *cly*. No-ee. Me

laugh. Getee hurtee much, laugh allee samee. Me no cly 'less *you* getee hurtee bad. You please be careful, Misser Hal. Then you no getee hurtee bad." Gam's treble voice dropped considerably lower on the last sentence. He gave Hal a curiously meaning look which Hal failed to catch.

"Never mind what happens to the rest of us," said George flippantly. Sprawled out next to Hal he had also caught the low-spoken words.

"Yes-ee," Gam loyally disagreed. "Me likee allee Long Tlail Boys. Me likee Misser Hal most. Him my esteem fren." Gam got to his feet and trotted away with one of the suit cases to where the packs had been piled.

"That is the end of him for a while," Tony predicted. "He will not come near us for fear of being teased."

"Our Chinese night bird has quit the family circle," David murmured; "he simply had to beat it."

"If I thought you fellows wouldn't fly up like a flock of Chinese night birds, I'd tell you something," broke in Norton's deep voice.

Hal, Tony, and George, who were stretched at ease on the grass, raised themselves on elbows to stare at the guide. Kent, David,

and Craig, who were sitting cross-legged, sat straighter.

"Attaboy; straight from the shoulder!" Kent called out encouragingly.

"Warranted not to flip, flap, or flutter," George promised.

"Nothing the matter with our nerve. Try a word or two on us." Craig surveyed Norton with speculative interest.

"Freako is here with the hush gun," Hal said with conviction. "Tried to shoot a chip off your anatomy while we were bringing up wood."

"You're *away off the trail*," Norton chaffed. "Now sit tight while I tell you. There'll be nothing doing until morning. I found a few bear tracks leading away from the basin."

"Ay!" Tony shot up from the grass like a skyrocket. To bring down a bear was one of the Mexican boy's most ardent ambitions. Thus far he had never achieved it. He was a good shot; had invariably held his own when hunting with his comrades. But the luck of shooting a bear was yet to come to him.

David and George had also bobbed up excitedly at the welcome news. David had shot one bear since first he had joined the Long Trail Boys. It had been a black bear

and he had afterward presented the dressed skin to Craig. Now he wished for a second bearskin, of his own rifle prowess, for Norton. George had shot several coyotes, a wolf, a wolverene, and still smaller game. But bear luck had not yet been his, either.

"Fold up, Mejicano." Hal had made no move to jump up from the grass. "I'll say: 'Take Boss Norton's advice for once'." Hal made a comical grimace at Norton. "It's a good night only when the moon's on the job." Hal laughingly paraphrased the secret slogan of the Gray Cloaks.

"Dark nights and hard rocks stub some toes," George contributed the rest of the paraphrase.

"*Es verdad* [true]." Antonio was not referring to George's witticism but was agreeing instead with the guide's opinion. He was about to drop down by the camp fire again when a sound from the black stillness of the forest tensed his tall, slim figure. He leaned forward, oblivious of all save the eerie sound.

"Too-hoo!" It was merely the hooting of an owl. Nevertheless Antonio and David had their own ideas concerning it.

"Too-o-o whoo-o-o-oo-oo!" George uttered

a prolonged doleful hoot. "How's that, old speckle-face?"

A deep silence followed as if the plaintive tree hooter had paused in dismay of such retaliation. A burst of laughter from the trailers shattered the hush. As it died out the plaintive call was repeated.

"Too-hoo!" Answer to the call rose from the very midst of the outfit.

"Now which one of you did that?" Norton demanded. "I'll say—"

"Watch, Señor Norton." Tony was laughing, but his voice vibrated with strong excitement. He pointed toward the eastern entrance of the dell. "Listen." Again he gave the owl call. This time the answer came instantly. "Move not, *amigos*. I have the reason."

"Great Jiminy Jones!" Hal found his feet and Tony's detaining hand on his shoulder in the same instant. Hal was all ready to rush toward what showed faintly as an approaching shadowy blot.

"*Los amigos* [the friends]. You will see now." Tony's assurance was just above a whisper. "Say it quickly, *hermanos*, and as loud as you can: '*How*'."

CHAPTER XI

Something in the Wind

"HOW!" The outfit roared the greeting as the three shadowy figures grew into real men by the bright flame of the camp fire.

"Oh, how, how, wow, wow!" yelped Hal. He had grabbed one of the three visitors' hands and was prancing about him like a frolicsome puppy. "Who told you you could leave the reservation?"

"Na-a-aw," Shy Beaver growled disgustedly. "No belong. Walk free. You know."

"Oh, that's so. Excuse me. Where's your plug hat? I've not seen you wear it since last September. Hope you haven't ragged it all out so soon." Hal continued to tease Shy Beaver, which was what the grinning Navajo most wished.

The rest of the outfit had surrounded White Shadow, the Yaqui chief, and his blanketed, distinguished grandfather, Agunta.

"I thought of you when I heard that owl hoot the first time," David was saying to

White Shadow. "You hooted like an owl the night I was with you when I ran away from camp and got lost on the mountain. Do you remember?"

"Yes." White Shadow smiled a little and inclined his feathered head. He was wearing a gorgeous, ornamental headdress composed of small red, green, and white feathers which trailed down over his back; but which was utterly unlike that of the northern and western Indian. His fine buckskins and moccasins were severely plain, however.

Agunta and Shy Beaver wore gorgeously colored Navajo blankets over their buckskins. They quickly shed their blankets in the exuberance of the greeting. Agunta was wearing a round deerskin cap which made him look more like an Egyptian mummy than ever. Shy Beaver's head was bare, his black hair straggling almost to his shoulders in coarse ropelike strands.

"I had the belief it was you when first I heard the owl hoot," Antonio assured White Shadow, in Spanish. "It is many moons since we met. Is all well with you?" Between Antonio and White Shadow was the bond of Mexico. Each had adopted the United States as his country, yet each had an inborn sympa-

thy for the unfortunate country of Montezuma.

"No, my heart is heavy. Soon you will hear." White Shadow replied in Spanish. He turned grave eyes upon Antonio, then became moodily silent.

"Are you hungry?" Kent was hospitably asking Agunta.

"*Ay, si.*" Agunta rolled his small black eyes and beamed at Kent.

"We'll soon fix you up." Kent hurried over to Gam Fu, who was placidly perched upon a pile of packs, watching the Indians soulfully.

"We'll get you up a feed, *pronto*," Hal cheerily assured the welcome trio of visitors. "After that comes a pow-wow around the camp fire. We had strawberry shortcake for supper, S. B., your favorite eat." He whanged Shy Beaver familiarly on the back. "All gone. Too bad. I'll see what kind of lollipops Gam can rustle up for you."

"We are thankful," White Shadow now said with stately simplicity. "We are hungry. We will eat, then sit by the council fire. We have not the peace pipe. We do not need. The hearts of our brothers beat true."

"That's the best could be said of us."

Norton spoke with a depth of sincerity. "Who is more welcome than our Yaqui and Navajo brothers at our camp fire?"

"I hadn't expected to see you so soon again, but I'm certainly glad," Craig said emphatically. "You must have changed your plans since we met on the trail below Norton's shack."

"Yes. All change in one hour. We come from our valley. Come fast. To-night we come near. Hear voices. We listen. Then we know voices of our brothers. I know *mi hermano* Mejicano listen well when I hoot like owl. He will tell we are near."

The instant White Shadow began to talk the smile had disappeared from Shy Beaver's leathery face. He at once assumed an attitude of deep respect. Agunta divided his attention between listening to his grandson and keeping an eye on Kent and Gam Fu, who were preparing a spread for the guests by the aid of pine torches stuck into the ground. There was enough of the delicatessen supper for a hearty meal left for the three Indians. Gam and Kent presently brought the feast on paper plates. They arranged the plates on a piece of white oilcloth which Gam had brought along as a tablecloth. The boys

vied with each other in serving the guests, continually getting in one another's way and all undertaking to pass the same plate at the same time.

"Pass Great Chief Agunta the dates, Davy. See if you can find a box of those chocolate caramel cakes, Gam." Hal had seen Agunta bite expectantly into a graham gem, then look blank as he got the taste of it.

"Allee lightee." The China boy turned and scampered toward the supplies, Hal following.

It took the two of them by the flickering light of the torches to find the chocolate cakes, Gam finally discovering them in the bottom pack of the heap. "Me gotee," he cried elatedly.

"Thank goodness. Trot 'em out. I'll bet Grandpa Agunta's chocolate hopes have hit the ground and left a dent in it." Hal breezed back to the camp fire, tossing up the box of crackers and catching it as he went.

Two minutes later he had raced back to Gam for a second box of the puffy little chocolate cakes. "Must have another box for S. B. It will take a box apiece to keep those two noble red men going. White Shadow doesn't want any. He has something on his mind besides that feather head rig.

Come and join the gang, Gam. There's nothing left to pick up but the cold oil-cloth. All the eats are stowed away in Indian Territory."

Gam shook his head half shyly. He had heard so much of White Shadow from the boys that he stood in profound awe of the Yaqui chief. Instead, he spread his poncho on the ground close to the packs and lay down on it, his bright eyes reflectively fixed on the party of men around the camp fire. He was glad no one but himself knew what a fright the hooting of the owl had given him. The weird "too-hoo" had momentarily terrified him. It had been a great relief to him to learn that it was White Shadow who had made the noise.

In lieu of a peace pipe Craig produced a box of fine cigars. The five older men smoked and listened to the lively talk of the boys, who had numberless questions to ask concerning Emerald Valley and the interesting life that White Shadow and Agunta lived. Shy Beaver had lately come from a long jaunt through Utah with two Navajo chiefs.

Now and then both Tony and Hal ventured to steal a glance at White Shadow, sitting grave and beautiful, but with a certain air of

deep somberness which was new to him as they had known him. Antonio already knew there was a strong reason for the chief's melancholy behavior, but Hal merely sensed the change in the Yaqui.

"Did you take your hat to Utah with you?" Hal quizzed Shy Beaver with a view toward livening matters. "You'd better say you did."

"Ye-a-a." Shy Beaver suddenly stood up, addressing himself in the Navajo tongue to White Shadow, who nodded. White Shadow was about to rise when Tony broke in in the same language.

"What's your hurry?" David inquired as Tony rose from beside him.

"I must go with Shy Beaver to help bring up the ponies of these three. They are at the edge of this little hollow, tied among the trees. He says you will like his hat when you see it." Tony laughingly threw this over his shoulder at Hal as he strode away after Shy Beaver.

"Now what's about to be pulled off?" Hal's broad genial smile of anticipation grew broader as he and his companions watched Antonio, the Navajo, and the three cayuses appear presently in the space dimly lighted by the fire.

Tony led the visitors' ponies over to where the ponies of the outfit had been tethered. As Shy Beaver advanced toward the camp fire with a good-sized object in his left hand, a jovial shout startled the night as the firelight revealed to the campers what he was carrying. It was a blue and white striped band box. He came up to Hal, a slow grin dawning on his red-brown features, proudly holding up the string-tied box for Hal to see.

"Well, I'll be dashed!" Hal viewed the blue and white striped band box with dancing eyes. "Who'd have thought it? A high hat in the untamed wilderness! Can you beat that? And they know about it in Utah! Wonderful!"

"Put on your hat, and make yourself at home." George was aching for a look at the cherished hat.

In spite of knowing he was being teased, Shy Beaver was none the less pleased with the hat Hal had given him the previous September just before going east to college. It was a black silk opera hat which had done Hal good service during his freshman year at Yale. His ever present spirit of fun had prompted him to present the discarded hat to Shy Beaver, who was spending a moon or two at Sweet

Water before disappearing for a while on his nomad travels.

Hal had ransacked the ranch storeroom for a suitable receptacle in which to present the gift and had grinningly pounced upon the blue and white linen hat box. The hat box and the hat were the last objects he might have expected to see in the wilds.

"Fix good. Make high." Shy Beaver now had the lid of the box off and was holding up the precious hat for the boys to see.

"Woof!" George raised an arm before his face and staggered off a few steps. A mirthful howl ascended from the Long Trailers. Shy Beaver had raised the hat to full height. More than that he had added a two-inch band of somewhat wrinkled red satin ribbon by the way of enlivening the dull black silk of the hat itself.

"You win." Hal solemnly held out a hand to the Navajo. Shy Beaver gravely set the hat on his head and shook hands with Hal. The rest of the outfit looked on with plenty of laughter and noise. White Shadow sat regarding Shy Beaver's performance with staid indulgence and Agunta tried to appear very indifferent. Watching him, Kent amusedly surmised that the aged chief would

not object to being the owner of the hat himself.

Presently the party had resumed their places around the ruddy blaze of the fire, and Norton and White Shadow were soon engrossed in a conversation concerning the best hunting territory near Jewel Falls. Now and then Agunta put in a mumbled sentence or two which either Antonio or White Shadow translated.

"Better stay with us, and hunt bear," Norton said to White Shadow during a pleasant lull which had descended upon the trailers. He had no inkling of a reason for the sudden appearance of the three Indians. He knew, however, that something of a special nature was in the wind; White Shadow had said as much to Craig. The Yaqui's plan must in some way concern the outfit. The guide had also noted that old Agunta seemed uneasy in spite of his stolid pose.

"Little Father, we can no stay, hunt bear." White Shadow's deep tones were full of sober mourning. "We have the trouble. Bandits kill three our men when they go take the silver to Mexico. We wish hunt with our brothers. Can no do now. Must trail. No hunt bear. Hunt bandits."

CHAPTER XII

Little Red Jonah

FOLLOWING White Shadow's revelation, a dead silence fell upon the campfire circle, broken only by the crackling of the blazing wood. It was the outfit's wordless tribute of sympathy to the sorrow of White Shadow. Each man understood the Yaqui's deep affection for his faithful scouts.

"Drag us along on that bandit hunt!" Hal burst forth presently with such pleading intensity as to bring a faint smile to White Shadow's grave features.

"No, Little Brent. This for the Indians who take brotherhood oath. We swear find killers." White Shadow went to some pains to explain the nature of the ancient Yaqui vengeance pact. It provided that a man who took the oath must not rest on the trail until he had brought the slayer of a friend or relative to the justice stone.

"Why don't you let us into that brotherhood stunt, Emperor?" Hal again pleaded,

half resentfully. A combined longing murmur from his comrades followed the question.

White Shadow regarded him with serious affection. "We no put our white brothers in danger, Little Brent." The Yaqui chief was very partial to the title of Emperor which Hal had given him when at Emerald Valley. "We know you fight for us, we need."

"Shucks! We're not your white brothers. We're all sporting fine, copper-colored coats of tan."

White Shadow's look of dignified amazement as Hal began, changed into a sudden flashing smile. Even his sadness was not proof against such a ridiculous view of matters. The outfit laughed with him. Agunta fixed his glittering black eyes upon irrepressible Hal, then gabbled energetically in Spanish to Tony who sat next to him.

"Great Chief Agunta says to you, Hal, that your spirit is good," Tony translated, "but the Yaqui must fight his own fight. He says he is old enough to be the grandfather of the Little Father, and twice your grandfather, so you must mind him and not tease. When the word has been kept we will all go together to Emerald Valley. He says it will be in the full of the August moon. The Yaqui's eyes are sharp. He falters not on the trail."

"Tell him I'll do the best I can, but that I'm a guaranteed bandit snatcher, warranted to wind up the worst case of banditti this side of the border in not more than three days," Hal replied glibly, then gave up with a prolonged, whistling sigh. "*That's* the final crimp in my joy hope."

"Sounded like the last gasp of a blustering gale," George told him pleasantly. "What I'd like to hear is how it all happened."

"The first sensible remark I've heard you make for ages," Hal returned. "I take off my hat to you." He reached over to Shy Beaver; raised the Navajo's high hat from his head in polite acknowledgment, then clapped it back on the Indian's head with a playful force which tilted it to a rakish angle. While he was thoroughly sympathetic in regard to White Shadow's recent misfortune he could not long remain solemn on the surface.

As the Little Father, Norton had his own part of the program to fulfill. He said in measured, impressive tones: "The hearts of your brothers are heavy, oh, chiefs of the Yaqui. We shall pray to the Great Spirit to make your eyes more keen and your feet more tireless, so that you may quickly keep

your vow. We shall ask the Great Spirit for justice. Our lives belong to our Yaqui brothers at need. Even the young braves are bound by the high duty of their brotherhood to Agunta and White Shadow. But Agunta and White Shadow have said, 'We will fight our own fight.' Now the brothers of the Yaqui chiefs must respect the Yaqui's vow. We will say only to our Yaqui brothers, 'Tell us what is in your hearts, that we may be of one great heart with you. I have spoken."

Norton's wide knowledge of Indians had informed him that the two Yaqui chiefs were awaiting a formal expression of sympathy from him, followed by a dignified request for their account of the details of the Indian tragedy.

"Good," Agunta grunted approvingly. He had caught the import of the speech as well as a few of the words.

"You know the Yaqui's will, Little Father." White Shadow gravely inclined his head to the guide. "This our sorrow. Twice in year, send some our men Mejico with silver. Go long way on ponies; then little way, railroad, to El Paso. Agunta have private car, El Paso. Car go Chihuahua, where is our bank.

This time when go Mejico, four small bags silver my men miss. Make mistake. Leave in valley. I don't know this. I am with convoy going Mejico. We go last moon; four weeks. I go to El Paso, then come back. I am on way to Emerald Valley when meet Craig, David.

"I am glad soon to hunt with my brothers. I think this, I ride trail, after see them. Then meet Agunta, Shy Beaver, right after see Craig. Agunta has had much trouble. He know when I come back. Come meet me. He tell about four bags of silver. He found when my men gone one day. He send four my men still in valley. He say must catch up with convoy quick. One man must carry bags on big horse. Three men go with him. Agunta mad. Men do his will quick. He is great chief and the *abuelo* [grandfather]." White Shadow made a slight, deferential gesture toward Agunta, who received it with wooden dignity.

"My four men go south from waterfall one day, then bandits shoot from bushes. Kill two my men in a minute. Then two bandits jump out bushes. Have masks. One bandit pull one my men off pony. Shoot him in back. *Malo, malo* [bad, atrocious]. Other

bandit fight with one Indian left. He see two more bandits in bushes. Know he can't fight four bandits and not die. He think must get away. Go back valley. Tell Agunta. My man stay on cayuse. One bandit try pull him off. Other bandit kill my other man. Bandits in bushes begin shoot, too. My man turn cayuse, quick. Cayuse kick bandit in face. Then my man ride away quick. Good cayuse. Get away. Ride all night. Next day come valley. Agunta sad. He go with Shy Beaver and some our men. Bring dead braves back valley. Ponies go with bandits. Steal even clothes my men. Agunta wait for me. Can no make vow till I come back."

"A bad business," Norton said with sympathetic stress.

"I'd like to pulverize those butchers," Hal sputtered with fierce sympathy. "Ah, do let us go after 'em with you, Emperor." A concerted longing rumble came from the other boys.

Kent thought the smile White Shadow turned on Hal was like a sudden return of sunlight to a dark sky. "The Little Father has spoken, *hermano*. Your words brave. We remember," he answered.

"What's your mind about these bandits, White Shadow? Do you think they're Mexican?" Craig asked in his direct way. "Maybe some of Metanzo's pals are still trying for your scalps and the silver mine. Some of his men got away at the time of our mountain scrap. They may have been lying low, waiting."

"Our man say bandits Mejicano. No see faces. Hear voices. Know how Mejicanos do. Cruel. Like tigers. Now don't know if some Metanzo's men tell other bandits of us. These bandits not far from valley. We must find quick. *We do.*" Upon White Shadow's fine face dawned a look of purpose, terrible in its bleak sternness.

"*Ay, hermano!*" Tony suddenly broke the pause which had ensued after White Shadow's purposeful words. The Mexican boy poured a rapid flow of Spanish into the Yaqui chiefs' ears. All three Indians showed marked interest in what Tony was saying. Though their faces were impassive, their eyes were filled with an eager light.

Norton and Craig knew enough Spanish to be able to tell the nature of Tony's rapid speech. The four boys guessed accurately as to what he was saying.

"Forgive me, Hal." Tony turned suddenly to Hal. "I should have let you tell White Shadow of the green bag. I wished to speak to him of it in Spanish which he knows better than English. I had the thought that the one we have called Freako may be one of the bandits who killed our Yaqui brothers."

"Glad you told him," Hal answered with a triumphant shout. "I'd say that black velvet mask and the *black* scarf were pretty good proofs of it. The pagoda and the knapsack have been stolen from some Mexican Don, probably. The scarlet sign—did you ever hear of such a thing, Emperor? Did Agunta? What have you to offer, S. B.?" His eyes sought the faces of the trio of Indians.

"*No sabe.*" White Shadow bent reflective eyes on the fire in an effort to visualize the oddity which Antonio had described to him. He appeared slightly puzzled. Agunta was eying his grandson as if hoping that White Shadow might understand what he evidently did not.

"The green bag, the stuff in it, and the three scarlet signs are locked in my safe at Mariposa," Craig said regretfully. "If you want to see them, Emperor, I'll give you a line to Chang. He'll open the safe for you."

Craig penciled a line to his houseman on a loose-leaf notebook he always carried and gave it to White Shadow.

The third scarlet sign which Craig had found pinned to his door with a knife had now become a part of Exhibit A. Instead of hiding near the gate post and watching for the claimant of the green knapsack, Hal had invited himself to stay all night at Mariposa and carried out a less hazardous plan. With Craig's permission he had turned on all four of the lawn arc lights, one of which shone directly on the gate post to which his message had been tacked. Until three o'clock the next morning he had sat watching the gate-post from a dark upstairs window. Then, sick of his tiresome vigil, he had gone grumblingly to bed. Next morning message and sign were still there. Hal had angrily torn up the message and placed the sign with the other two in the knapsack.

"I'll do better than that for you, Emperor," Hal declared. "You may take the whole business with you, if you like. Something else I can do for you." Hal shot a mischievous glance about the circle. His hand went into his blouse pocket and appeared again with a scarlet square resting flatly upon his palm. The outfit hailed it noisily.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself—hanging a hoodoo on this happy band?" David said severely. "Now I understand why I kicked over my coffee cup this noon, got stabbed in the eye by a tree branch, and hit Craig by mistake when I was after George. You see Craig got his part of the Jonah, too."

"You should grumble. This may be little pink Jonah's one chance to be something spiffy," Hal flung back. He offered the sign to Agunta out of respect. Agunta waved it away, indicating that his grandson was to examine the odd square first.

White Shadow studied it long and earnestly. "*No sabe*," he said. "Is no Indian, Spanish, Mejicano."

"Our China boys say it's not Chinese," Craig interposed.

"This give me?" the Indian now requested, holding up the fateful square.

"It's yours. Don't let what David said scare you," Hal cautioned, his brown eyes twinkling.

"*Gracias* [thank you]." The Yaqui's one hand reached out for the square, the other went to his head. Off came his feathered headdress. The outfit shouted surprise. Where were his raven-black flowing locks?

Instead the campers saw a head of thick black hair cropped in present-day fashion. White Shadow appeared Spanish rather than Indian, being little darker than Antonio.

"*Bueno?*" Agunta eagerly addressed the group of woodsmen, his jet-black eyes roving from face to face.

"Sure!" roared the trailers as one man.

"Ugh!" The old chief motioned to his distinguished-looking grandson to hand him the scarlet sign. While the party talked with White Shadow about his hair cut, the old man examined the sign as a child might inspect a new plaything.

"I don't like long hair. Agunta want me keep. Long time he say, don't cut," was White Shadow's half boyish admission. "Now he knows must be. No good for me wear long more."

"Your reward for minding grandpa," grinned Hal.

'You look like a classy Spanish grandee," George said admiringly, "but not better than with long hair and feather ornaments."

"Agunta bring from valley riding suit for me, sombreros for all. I wear riding suit a little. Agunta, Shy Beaver wear blankets over buckskins. Sometimes fold blankets

for saddle, then wear sombreros. Sometimes I wear feathers, buckskins. So change often, paint the face, *quizás* [perhaps]. Fool bandits. We know how to do."

"Mebbe get hair cut, too," hopefully promised Shy Beaver. "*No sabe* me then."

"Go on!" scoffed Hal mirthfully. "I'd know you with a bald head and a nose ring."

"Na-a-w. No wear," chuckled the Navajo.

"You've the right dope, *hermano*," Norton said with conviction. "Cropped hair and riding clothes will make a good disguise for you. You'd be able to pass anywhere as a Spanish Mexican. You Indians can't be beaten either, when it comes to changing your faces with paint."

"Riding clothes good in Mejico. I don't want to go Mejico. Find in Nevada, I hope. We go where our men shot. Look all around. These bandits maybe stay near where kill our men. Wait while. Try find where is silver. Maybe think more men come with more silver. No *sabe* nothing. Soon, we find bandits' train." The Yaqui's face took on an appearance of chiseled stone.

"Ay-y-y!" Agunta's rising cry brought all eyes to bear upon him. The aged chief had made a sudden forward lunge which nearly

tumbled him into the camp fire. He righted himself with a jerk. At the same time he kept up a rapid mumbling to his grandson. Then he calmly put the scarlet sign into one of his pockets.

CHAPTER XIII

Through the Morning Mists

"HE has seen before. Where? *No sabe* yet," White Shadow translated. "He will look; think. After while, *sabe*."

Agunta was already on his feet, his glittering eyes roving restlessly in his mummy-like face. "Me think," he mumbled. "Go sun-up." He tucked the chocolate cracker box under one arm and trotted toward the end of the dell where the three Indians had entered.

White Shadow and Shy Beaver soon followed Agunta. The old chief, deep in thought, sat swathed in his gay-striped blanket, a hunched, bright-eyed figure, his yellow-white face almost on a level with his drawn-up knees. He paid not the least attention to his two companions when they came up.

The Long Trail Boys were equally ready to turn in. They had had a big day and were too sleepy to do more than yawn and exchange

a few drowsy pleasantries. Quiet soon settled down upon the sleeping campers.

Toward daylight Hal awoke from a wild dream in which he found himself endlessly pursuing a bear wearing Shy Beaver's high hat. The bear managed always to keep a few feet ahead of him, finally turning out to be Gam Fu with long black hair and two suit cases. He opened his eyes to find White Shadow bending over him. One of the Indian's hands lay lightly across Hal's lips, the other had gently touched him on one shoulder. Hal had followed his favorite custom of picking a solitary bed under a tree.

"Come." White Shadow took Hal's arm and led him noiselessly to the lower end of the dell. In the dim light Hal saw three ponies standing, Agunta and Shy Beaver already in saddle.

"Agunta *sabe*." White Shadow spoke again, very low. "You take." He returned Hal the sign. "Come first cross Pacifico. No Chinese. Agunta *no sabe* what country. He say one bandit use, twenty years gone, in Mejico. He hear this bandit die, ten years gone. This bandit called el Halcón. That mean—the hawk. This bandit call red sign la Venganza. That mean—the spite. El

Halcón have no sons; no brothers. I think no friends. Now sign is here again. Who bring? El Halcón no die, *quizás*. Agunta has vow against el Halcón. He kill grandson Agunta's old friend, Pedro Arcano."

"Some story," Hal returned under his breath.

"Agunta think el Halcón *no sabe* him; never see him. Agunta see el Halcón once. Never forget. He say maybe el Halcón no die. Go to another country. Need money. Come Mejico again. Maybe hear we are rich. Some men we have business with *sabe* we have silver mine. Maybe one these men *malo*. Agunta say el Halcón true hawk. He smell silver. Come for it."

"Maybe the fellow I saw looking in one of Craig's windows at Mariposa was this el Halcón. The fellow Kent saw on the lawn was very tall. Did Agunta say how el Halcón looked?"

"Si, tell you, then go. East soon light." White Shadow glanced toward the graying east. "El Halcón tall. No fat. Maybe fifty years. Ten years gone, hair black. Maybe gray now. Speak soft. Fine words. Black heart. Give hand. Shoot in back. Is no Mejicano, but come cross Pacifico. He

bring this red sign. It very old. Tell Little Father, our brothers, I no call them from sleep. Call you to give sign. It is yours. So you get up. Listen to words Agunta."

"Thank you for waking me." Hal's merry features were bright with excitement at the Yaqui's disclosure. "Maybe our bunch will have a chance to chase old el Halcón, if he's alive and in these mountains. The fellow who looked in Craig's window lost the green bag. *He* was after Craig's horse. Craig's horse came from Mejico. Maybe the answer to it all is el Halcón. If it is, *I hope you get him.*"

"*It must be. Must do.* You speak now, Agunta, Shy Beaver," the Indian requested. "Must go, Little Brent."

"Ugh. Good cake," was Agunta's farewell remark as he shook Hal's hand.

"Good-bye. See soon. Be good," were Shy Beaver's parting sentiments.

"Till the August moon is large, Emperor." Hal's hand went out to the stately Yaqui. His warmly significant tone brought a smile to the grave impassivity of the Indian's features.

"When August moon large, come for you on trail, Little Brent. *Adios.*" White

Shadow turned and mounted his horse. Hal stood watching the three Indians as they rode noislessly away through the heavy morning mist.

"*Judas Priest!*" he exclaimed. His gaze left the veil of mist into which the three horsemen had ridden, and wandered back to the scarlet square in his hand. "Little peevish Jonah has been a great traveler. Oh, watch me wake up the outfit and tell 'em."

Snatching a handkerchief, a piece of string, and a metal match box from various pockets Hal wrapped the handkerchief about the box, tied the scarlet square to the little bundle and whizzed it into the midst of his awakening comrades.

"What sort of way is that to treat your friends?" Craig demanded in an injured tone as Hal came up to his comrades at a frisky gallop. The strange missile had hit the ranchman squarely on the nose. "I'll say the blamed scarlet sign *is* a hoodoo." He tenderly rubbed his injured nose.

"Craig, excuse me. *Please* excuse me, Misser Craig," Hal managed to gasp between gusts of laughter. "You'll forget you have a nose when you hear what I have to say. Buck up. Forget the past."

"I could almost hear what you had to say while you were talking to White Shadow." Norton put in teasingly. "I couldn't hear *him* at all."

"Almost, but not quite. If you couldn't hear *him*, then you couldn't hear me."

"I heard you say 'Judas Priest'," Norton insisted.

"Back Hector. That was after Emperor blew. I was blithering to myself for joy. You're jealous. You're trembling for fear some observing person may take Hal for the Nevada hermit."

"I wish that was all I had to worry over," Norton retorted. "I heard you when you got up from under the tree where you'd been camping and White Shadow led you away. I didn't hear him when he came to you. See the difference. I knew he had something special to tell you. I guessed then it must be about the sign."

"I believe now you're a first-rate guide. You've shown what you can do. I can afford to forget your past flivvers as a—"

"I haven't shown you yet what a strong arm guide I am." Norton worked his right arm suggestively. "I could throw a hundred and sixty pounds of freshness into that basin over there as easy as wink."

"What's your weight, Davy?" Hal innocently asked David. "See here, Craig. Where's my scarlet scarecrow. You saw it last."

"Yes, and I ought to keep it. You're not fit to be trusted with it. I was whanged on the back by one roughneck and almost had my nose broken by another to-day," Craig complained as he handed the alleged hoodoo back to Hal.

Craig's plaintive enumeration of his injuries merely furnished the outfit with something to laugh at. They had now gathered around Hal to hear what he had to tell them. Even Gam had come to the edge of the circle. In his right hand was the iron frying pan with which he had once fought for his life. His face fell as he saw the scarlet sign he hated and feared in Hal's hand, but he listened with the solemnity of an owl to the story Hal told of the sign, and the bandit, el Halcón. During the buzz of lively comment which followed Hal's account of his early-morning talk with White Shadow, the China boy slipped away to prepare breakfast. He made the coffee and fried the bacon and potatoes, but he had a worried pucker between his brows.

"Nothing like old Hawknose as a lovely

prospect," George declared later with flippant enthusiasm to the circle of breakfasters seated cross-legged on the ground around the white oil cloth. "This is his number. *Buenos dias.*" George bowed from the waist with a killing smile. "Ping-g!" He clapped a hand to his back and flopped over against David. He flopped farther to the left than he had intended, thrusting an open hand into David's agate plate and scattering fried potatoes, biscuits and bacon in several directions.

"Sorry I haven't a gun with me. I'd give you a *real* imitation of el Hawknose," chuckled David as he rescued a whole biscuit from the breakfast wreck scattered in the grass and helped himself to a fresh supply of bacon and potatoes, while the outfit roared with the usual lack of sympathy for mishap.

"See here, Bosses Craig and Norton, how long are we going to stay here?" Hal presently demanded as he finished his coffee and sprang up from the grass. "Gam wants me to help him put up a lean-to to keep the packs under. What's the use, if we move on in a couple of days?"

"It's up to you fellows whether or not we move on, *pronto*. I thought you were going hunting with the gang, Brent. If you're not,

I'd advise you to help Gam put up the lean-to," Norton said very soberly.

"Why? Think it's going to rain?" Hal squinted up at the clear blue of the sky.

"It may not rain for a week or two. I suggest it as a fine way to keep you out of mischief."

"Think again, Greenwood Gilbert," Hal retorted, unabashed. "The mischief trail misses me a mile. You're thinking of Kent. He got lost, you know. That was very mischievous."

"Is that so? You've been lost yourself since I was." Kent rose to defense.

"Let's not talk about it." Hal raised an arm and ducked his head behind it in pretended embarrassment.

"How long do you want to stay here, fellows? Speak up." The guide addressed the others who had also finished eating breakfast and were now on their feet.

"Why not try our luck, today and tomorrow, bear hunting, then move on again?" proposed Craig. "Where is our next stop, Norton?"

"About fifteen miles from here, and on the next mountain to this. It's a fairly stiff climb, too. We cross the upper part of that

mountain and take a pretty good trail down it on the other side to the next one of the range. Then we'll be almost halfway to Emerald Valley. I know of two good trout streams in that region. So we'd better wait till we get up there to go fishing."

"I thought I'd go fishing today if I could find a brook," Kent said. He and Hal were equally determined to let their comrades have all the chance there might be as bear hunters. Kent's hunting record of three bears in two summers was the highest of the outfit. "Any good fishponds around here?" he asked the guide.

"Nothing startling. There's a little stream a couple of miles farther up the mountain, directly north of this camp. You might catch enough fish for breakfast tomorrow."

"That's Kent. If I help put up the lean-to, Brent, will you go fishing with me?"

"You don't have to work to win," Hal affably assured Kent. "You go fishing. My esteemed 'fren' and I are going to distinguish ourselves as builders. Fu and Brent, Builders. Lean-tos and Camp Fires a Specialty."

"Cut out the josh. Will you go fishing?" Kent yelled his question in Hal's ear.

"Ugh. Mebbe." Hal took a Shy Beaver

pose. "No now. Stay camp. Eat good. Josh Gam."

"Go to it. You'll do more joshing than working, I'll say." Kent gave up in disgust. "I'm going to overhaul my pack and lay out some trout flies." He sauntered off toward the pile of packs.

While he was hunting trout flies the hunters came up, scrambling over him and one another in search of their knapsacks. They had dropped their knapsacks on arrival the night before, piling them on top of the packs. Their rifles had been carefully wrapped in a poncho and placed within easy reach before turning in. Craig and Norton packed automatic revolvers at their belts which they had obtained official permission to carry.

"Come on, Confucius. What's stirring in the backwoods kitchen?" Hal strolled over to Gam who was putting away the frying pan and the coffee pot. Happening to spy a biscuit on the grass which had strayed from the supplies Hal broke it into pieces and began pegging them at Kent. His back turned to Hal, Kent was industriously spreading the contents of his pack on the grass while he hunted for trout flies.

"You helpee me make littlee loof, Misser

Hal. Putee allee eats under. Then no getee wet. Plentee wood there." The China boy nodded toward the trail.

"Allee lightee. Only we won't put up a lean-to that will last a lifetime. Boss Norton says we've got to go hiking, and do some more piking, in three days. We've got to chase the next mountain and catch up with it."

"Te, he, he," giggled Gam. "Can no catchee when don't lun. Mountain stand still allee time."

"You know too much, Misser Fu. To work, to work! *Vamos!* Don't keep yourself waiting. *Adios*, Misser Kent. Sorry I haven't another biscuit." Hal rushed off toward the tangled forest growth outside the dell, singing the Long Trail song at the top of his voice.

He spent an hour or more hunting suitable tree limbs and broken pieces of bark for a lean-to. Although Gam knew very little about making one, he was willing and eager to learn, and his bright eyes interestedly followed Hal's every movement.

"So long. I'm going to hunt the fish pond," Kent called out when Hal and Gam presently returned to the camp, laden with wood. "If my luck's good I'll come back at lunch time for you."

"Right-o. Hand my regards to the speckles," Hal called back to him.

The lean-to rose speedily under Hal's nimble hands. The two boys carried the packs to it, depositing them well under the rude shelter. By the time they had finished their task it was noon and they were hungry. Gam had been highly pleased with Hal's decision to remain in camp with him. As a reward of merit he brought out a tall tin box, in which he had packed eggs, wrapped in cotton, and set about the concocting of a chocolate pudding.

"Oh, you pudding!" Hal was now engaged in getting out his own fishing tackle. He gave an appreciative sniff as the pleasant aroma of cooking chocolate was wafted to his nostrils.

"You please takee plail, get watee for cloffee?" Gam politely presented Hal with the camp water pail.

"Yours truly." Hal accepted the pail, swung it about his head like an Indian club and started for the waterfall. Gam triumphantly lifted the stewpan full of pudding from the fire and set it upon a large flat-topped stone to cool. Beside the pudding pan he placed a jelly-roll cake, wrapped in waxed

paper. Then he busied himself further with the making of sliced tongue sandwiches.

At the waterfall Hal had discovered something which caused him to forget his errand there. Leading away from the basin of the fall was a fresh series of bear tracks. "By George! They look as though old shaggy boy had just stepped out of 'em!" he cried, as he began to trace them, eyes bent to the soft earth.

A shrill yell from Gam Fu brought his eyes from the ground in a flash. He turned them in the direction of the sound. Then he opened his own mouth in a shout of surprise. Beside the stone on which stood the stewpan of pudding was a huge, shaggy brown bulk. A hungry brown muzzle was dipping itself into the pan. Gam was not frightened, but he was furious at the loss of his delectable chocolate pudding. He was prancing with indignation and waving his arms, but at a safe distance from the powerful sweep of the big bear's forepaws.

"Jumping Jupiter!" Hal dropped the water pail and raced to the lean-to. Though it seemed an age it took him only a couple of minutes to grasp his rifle. "I hate to spoil his lunch," he muttered as he coolly sighted

for a shot. The bear had just given the empty pudding pan a contemptuous bat off the stone and was feasting on the jelly cake, paper and all.

"Crack, crack!" Hal fired two shots. The sharp detonations sent the birds on the near-by trees fluttering from their perches. The big brown robber staggered a step or two, swayed on his powerful feet for an instant, and then toppled over. For a brief space the huge, furry hulk moved feebly, then lay still. Hal's first shot had entered the bear's brain.

"He's done for." Hal ran past Gam to where the bear lay. "Talk about bear luck! It's a shame to take this fellow's hide. Why go miles on a bear hunt when you can have the genuine, untamed article delivered free of charge at your front door?"

CHAPTER XIV

Something That Looked Like Nothing

"WHAT'S the use of going off the lot to hunt bear when the bear's willing to come and hunt you?" George demanded with pretended grumpiness the next morning at breakfast. "I'm going to take my gun today and stick by the water hole. I may suddenly find a great big grizzly sitting right beside me on the bank."

"It was plain luck; nothing else. Gam could have shot that pudding snatcher, easy as wink, if he'd had a gun." Hal was not looking for glory as a bear killer. "Dare I offer you the pelt, Misser Davis?"

"Na-w-w. You dare not. I'll hand myself one some of these fine days. Mejicano thinks he's it. He potted the bear we were after all day, when it was on the run, too. Some more plain luck."

"*Nunca* [never]. I am what you call the spiffy sportsman," Tony modestly corrected, a gleam of self-derision in his dark eyes.

The hunting party had returned after dark

on the previous evening bringing with them a few wild partridges, the skin, and as much of the meat of the black bear as they could carry. George was more disgusted than ever at his lack of bear luck, for he was now the only one of the five boys who had not bagged a bear.

"Gam baited the bear with pudding and jelly cake," laughed Norton. "The old fellow couldn't resist sweet stuff." The guide had examined the carcass of the bear and was of the opinion that the animal had been a mountain veteran.

"I'll strap my rifle to my back and go hunting with a dish of pudding in one hand and a jelly roll in the other," George planned with mock resolution.

"No more jellee roll. Bear eatee las' one," was Gam Fu's discouraging information.

"That settles it. I'll have to fall back on my rifle. I'm going to pot a bear today if I have to go hunting all by myself."

"I'll go with you, George," Craig volunteered. "Who else wants to go?"

"I will. I'm still on the lookout for a black bear skin," declared David.

"Come on, Brent, let's go for fun. Our bear record is three-three. We won't spoil

your chances, George. We'll trail along and give you good advice. No use in going fishing. The brook above here is a frost. The trout that own it have their lives insured," Kent said with a chuckle. "I hung around there till after two o'clock and caught only four little fellows."

"I'm going to stay in camp today," Norton announced. "I'll skin the bear and take care of the meat. Then I'm going to turn cook and fix a bear pot roast that'll make your mouths water. That means feed the fire most of the afternoon."

"I am the one to do that for you, Señor Norton," Tony offered in his quiet, dependable fashion. "Tomorrow I will be the cook and make the fine kettle full of partridges and rice, the way we Mejicanos cook the chicken and rice."

"No-ee," Gam objected in a high key. "You cook, Misser Norton cook. Me don't do nossin."

"Don't worry, I'll give you a potato and onion paring job," Norton hastened to reassure Gam. "Besides, you can learn how to cook a pot roast like the one I'm going to tackle. Next time you can do it."

"Allee lightee," Gam sighed audibly. He

decided that he would make the partridges into a potpie before Tony had a chance at them. Gam did not intend to surrender his dominion over the "eats" to anyone, Misser Hal not excepted.

"Keep your eyes open at all times, and your rifles handy," was the guide's parting caution to the hunters as the party of five were presently ready to leave camp. "No saying how many brigands may be roving these mountains. A bunch of Mex bandits may have scattered purposely through this range to watch for White Shadow's Indians with more silver. Bandits got White Shadow's men only a day out from Cascade Canyon. The fellow who was hanging around Mariposa after Craig's horse was a bandit, that's certain. We're between two fires, I'd say. We're likely to be followed by bandits, and we may meet 'em on the way to Emerald Valley. Again we may not see any sign of 'em."

"Do you think the fellow who scattered the scarlet signs and lost the knapsack is el Halcón?" David asked his uncle.

"That's a hard nut to crack. El Halcón may have really died ten years ago and passed his bunch of scarlet signs and his thunder on

to a pal. Or he may have been killed by another bandit who's been trading upon his notoriety since then. So far as he's concerned, if Freako is el Halcón, he's dangerous to us only once, alone."

"I get you." Hal was first to catch the guide's inference. "You mean the first time he fires that hush gun on the camp will be the last. That we can run him down on our ponies before he can get away."

"Exactly. He'd have to come near enough to camp to fire on us so that he'd be hard put to give us the slip afterward. He doesn't know what this gang can do," Norton said with a kind of grim pride.

"No, you bet he doesn't," Hal echoed.

"If Freako should camp on our trail it would be on account of the loss of his knapsack. He may have sneaked up to the gate and read your message after you quit watching at the window," Craig said. "A fellow as tall as he could have stood on a box and read the sign by covered flash light without disturbing it. This gang of brigands that murdered White Shadow's three men might covet our ponies and guns. On the contrary, they may be too keen after the silver mine to waste time attacking us. They have nerve to be

in the States at all. They know they can't get away with it for long. I'll bet they don't know the strength of White Shadow's band, or that they're government scouts."

"This White Shadow said to me, Señor Norton," Antonio broke in. "He thinks perhaps some one high in rank in Mejico is the *traidor* [traitor] and the secret friend of bandits. So he is one who perhaps thinks bandits may do in Nevada what they do in Mejico."

"What if this Crespero, the man from whom you bought Serapis, was the fellow?" Kent had been deeply interested in Craig's account of the buying of the thoroughbred.

"He might well be, according to the story I heard from those two fellows in the restaurant." Craig stared at Kent, more than half inclined to conviction.

"Ugh, but you're a ninety clam-power shut-mouth, Mejicano!" Hal made a disapproving face at Antonio. "Such an interesting little bean to hide away!"

"I forgot to speak of it," Tony confessed. "You were the one to talk so much when you came from saying the *adios* to White Shadow that a poor shepherd had no chance. Is it the wonder I forgot?"

"Blame it on me, slippery old thing. Nothing like handing it to handy Hal. Before this bean conference ends, I'll add a bean to it. I'll say Norton and Craig are a couple of braves. They led us right out into the woods instead of bottling up the expedition after we got into touch with friend Freako." Hal shot a waggish glance at Norton and continued: "Norton said to Craig: 'Why let a mazy red sign butt in? Our gang can lick the world.' Craig said: 'Sure, Mike. Can up the danger worry, and put it on ice. Never try to restrain the outfit.' "

Hal reeled off these affable sentiments, supposedly Craig's and Norton's, with an air of ingenuous heartiness.

"Well, what else can we say?" Norton and Craig had exchanged laughing glances. "We aren't going to shy at the first trouble sign. Our manly duty is to go on with our trip, minding our own affairs. I won't countenance the taking of needless risks, but"—he paused and surveyed his charges—"we're not going to turn back. We're going to Emerald Valley. Fellowship with White Shadow and Agunta demands that we stick to the trail we've started to blaze. Are you satisfied, boys?"

"Hurrah, hurrah, rah, rah, rah!" The answer came with a will.

"All right. Go hunting now, and stop bothering me. I've a serious job ahead of me. Be back by dark if you want any bear pot roast. Remember, there are three of us here to eat it."

After the hunting party had gone on its way in rollicking high spirits, Tony helped Norton to prepare, then skin the brown bear Hal had shot. It was well toward noon when they had finished cutting from the carcass of the animal such pieces of meat as Norton desired for the pot roast and for steaks. In the cool, dry air of the mountain climate such cuts of meat would keep sweet and fresh for a number of days.

When finally the bear had been disposed of, Tony decided to press the burros into service and bring up a load of wood from a distance of half a mile down the trail where he had seen a profusion of dry, rotten wood.

"Take it easy, Tony, till after lunch," Norton said, "then I'll start my pot roast, and go with you. Gam thinks I'm pretty mean," he added, in a lower tone. "I'm going to surprise him by telling him how to run the pot roast after I've started it. I'll

let him tend it while we're after wood. As soon as we've loaded two burros I'll start back to camp with 'em so as not to leave him alone long."

At lunch that day Gam had little to say. He sat on the ground opposite the guide, wearing a sad expression that Norton understood and had hard work not to laugh at. Afterward he watched the guide with the same sadly solemn air while Norton started the large chunk of bear meat in the iron kettle which had traveled with the Long Trailers since their first summer hike.

"Go ahead, Gam," he presently told the crestfallen China boy. "Keep the fire under this kettle just as I have it now, and don't start the potatoes to cooking in the gravy too soon. An hour before the meat is ready to lift is plenty of time for them."

"Me know." Gam tried to appear dignified but instead he broke into smiles. For once he was delighted to get rid of Misser Norton and to resume charge of the cooking. He still had dark intentions concerning Tony's proposed partridge and rice effort, and resolved while he had "plentee fire burnee long" to cook the partridges for the potpie and hide them till the next day. Tony was

not one of the "bossees," so Gam had no special respect for Tony's wishes.

As soon as Tony and Norton had driven the burros off down the trail, Gam hurriedly brought the partridges to a place not far from the cook fire and busied himself with plucking them. With two culinary jobs on his hands he was in his element. He speedily ripped the feathers from the birds, singed them over the fire, and then piled them on a square of white oilcloth which he often used in his work. Next he replenished the fire, taking an anxious look at the pot roast. It was now giving out a most savory odor as it simmered slowly toward perfect cooking. He gathered up the oilcloth square of birds and trotted to the side of the dell opposite to that by which the wood gatherers had departed down the trail.

Gam selected a place in the bushes outside the dell in which to dress the birds for he thought it prudent to keep out of sight with this operation in case Tony should come back. His nimble fingers flew as he dressed the birds and cut them into pieces with a long, sharp knife.

"It's not wise to leave Gam alone at camp," Norton said to Antonio as the two finished tying the first load of wood on one of the

burros. "I'll not do it again. He's a scrapper, but that wouldn't save us our ponies if some one tried to run 'em off. There's Craig's horse. I keep forgetting that he's riding such a high stepper this trip. I think it had better be the rule, hereafter, that two of us besides Gam must stay in camp while the others are off over the hills. Suppose we were well along toward Emerald Valley and had a lot of our supplies stolen. It would crimp us then like sixty."

"*Verdad* [true]," Antonio nodded. While the guide was speaking he had commenced tying a load of wood on the second burro. "This load can be a little less, Señor Norton," he suggested. "So you can go now, quickly back to camp."

"Good." The Mexican boy, with Norton's help, soon had the second load ready. Norton cut a light branch from a green sapling to use as a whip and started the lazy burros along up the trail.

While the guide was on the return trail the China boy was hustling to finish cutting up the birds. He dropped the last pair of partridge legs on the heap on the oilcloth with a joyful little crow. "Now, go washee," he declared with satisfaction. Lifting the oil-

cloth from the ground, he scampered toward the basin, his eyes peering shrewdly toward the other end of the dell. Neither Misser Norton nor Misser Tony was in sight.

Gam reached the basin and plumped down beside it with a gurgle of satisfaction. He placed the oilcloth and its load on a stone at the edge of the basin, then took one more look toward the down trail. "Nobodee come," he crooned. His gaze drifted idly from the trail to the fire where the pot roast was steadily growing more appetizing. His eyes roved on toward the lean-to.

Splash! Into the basin went the oilcloth and the material for tomorrow's pot pie. Gam's attention, however, was not on the disaster he had just caused. His round Chinese face had become a frozen mask of horror. He was staring at something he found even more terrifying than either the scarlet sign or the evil face he had seen peering in at Craig's window.

It was something black and furry that stood on its hind legs in the fashion of a human, was at least four feet tall and looked like a great black monkey with a long black tail. Yet it had not a monkey's face. So far as Gam could tell it had nothing but a black blot for a face.

At first glimpse he had seen it squatting on the ground rummaging among the packs. As he continued to watch it in silent horror it had turned its empty black face toward him. Instantly it had sprung to its hind legs, but had not tried to run. Instead it still stood its ground, facing him.

Gam was not in any sense a coward. In the midst of his fright he caught the gleam of the bright steel knife in his left hand. With the recollection of the knife his courage rose. He gave a queer shrill Chinese battle squeal and charged upon the intruder.

Whatever the thing was, it gave ground and ran. With it went one of the packs which had lain unopened at its feet. After it went Gam at a speed equal to its own. The featureless visitor fled for the same side of the dell as the down trail was on. It made a frantic dash, however, for the tangled growth above the trail. Gam following recklessly.

All of a sudden he lost the creature as it dodged in and out among the trees, but he did not care much now, for something had hurtled through the air and struck him on the top of the head. He put his free hand to his head, swaying dizzily. He was going to fall from the top of a high canyon, down, down, down—

Norton's voice, raised in an anxious halloo, rallied Gam's scattered senses like a clarion call, and he tried to brace himself against a tree. He tried to answer the guide but could voice only a piteous little whine. However, he kept on listening to the guide's loud yells and trying to answer them, and presently he grew less dizzy. Finally he left the tree's supporting trunk and found he could stumble along.

"What's the matter? What got you?" The guide had only to catch sight of the China boy to know that he was groggy from violent treatment.

"Me don't know," Gam answered vaguely. "Me see somethin', lookee like nossin. No lookee like bear. No lookee like monkee. No lookee like manee. It don't have any face. Walkee on two legees."

"Something must have got you hard. You're seeing things," Norton declared. "By George, there's blood on your hair!" Norton sprang forward to catch the wavering body.

"Yes-ee," muttered Gam and tumbled in a heap at the guide's feet.

CHAPTER XV

Fisherman's Luck

"IF I could lay hands on the Great It, I'd hang it to the yard arm and dance at the hanging," sputtered Hal Brent wrathfully. "It certainly must have a worse grudge against me than Freako, or it wouldn't have picked out my pack and skidooed with it. Blamed sure I never met it this side of a nightmare. Now Hal has no hanky, no hosiery, no chocolate, no trout flies—nossin. All I have left is the scarlet sign. I shan't have that long. I'm going to give it to you, Craig."

"Well, you needn't mind," Craig said decidedly. "I wouldn't deprive you of it for worlds."

"You know you are welcome to anything in my pack, *hermano*," Tony hastened to say. "It is yours."

"Thank you, generous shepherd. I've annexed more than half of your pack now for my own personal use. I ought to take the rest and let you get along without a pack,"

Hal said mockingly "You're all good scouts," he told the group around the camp fire, "and you've been good to Hal since Gam saw It, and It saw Hal's pack."

A week had passed since the eventful afternoon when the dreadful creature which Gam had not been able satisfactorily to describe had visited the camp, rummaged the campers' belongings, and made off with Hal's pack.

Gam Fu had rallied quickly from the effects of the injury to his head caused by a piece of rock which the escaping intruder had thrown at the China boy. Norton had picked him up, laid him upon a spread of blankets with Craig's rubber air cushion under his head, and bathed his injured head and face. He had plastered the deep cut on the crown of Gam's round head, and, before the return of the hunters, Gam had resumed his watch over the pot roast. He had also gone to the basin, fished out the pieces of partridge meat from its clear depths and set them to stewing beside the pot roast.

The hunters had returned at dark with no bear and only a few birds. They had not been enthusiastic over the territory in which they had been hunting, so Norton's opinion that the outfit had better move on in the

morning had been greeted with acclamation. Gam and his plastered head had been the center of attraction at the camp fire that evening. The boys had quizzed him thoroughly concerning the strange, hideous creature he had seen rummaging the packs. His later description of it, however, did not vary much from the first account he had given of it to Norton.

The Long Trail Boys had made all sorts of guesses as to what or who it might have been. If an animal, the description of it answered more nearly to that of a large, black ape. Seen a little way off it was possible Gam might not have been able to discern the features of its black face. If a human being—there the boys stopped. According to a height which Gam had measured with his hand it had been about four feet tall. Only a child or a dwarf could claim such a height. Neither was likely to be running wild among the mountains decked in a monkey skin. The hurling of the rock at Gam, and the wild disorder in which the packs had been left, closely resembled monkey tactics.

How a large, black monkey should happen to be running wild among the Nevada mountains was also another poser. There was

always the plausible theory that it might have escaped from a zoo, circus, or monkey show and hidden itself in the mountains. Before leaving the dell the next morning the boys made a thorough patrol of its immediate surroundings but they saw no sign of the nameless black creature.

With the next stop fifteen miles ahead up the mountain the outfit had traveled steadily all that day, making slow progress on account of the steepness of the climb and the slowness of the burros. This hike had taken them up the mountain situated next to the one on which they had been encamped. They had not stopped, but had journeyed on across the upper part of the mountain, bound for a spot about which Norton knew, where there was a deserted shack standing in the midst of a forest plateau.

During their week's hike they had neither seen nor heard anything of a sinister nature. They kept steadily to the trail by day, and lounged luxuriously around their bright-flamed camp fire at night, turning in under the twinkling summer stars, weary and happy.

The one cloud in Hal's sky was the loss of his pack. The inconvenience of having to do without it caused him to remember frequently

the unclassified marauder that had stolen it. He always remembered and spoke of the thief with a degree of injured indignation.

"A good thing for me I've still got my rod and lines," he said half grumpily. "Tomorrow I'm going to drown my grouch in the fish-pond. Lead me to that ice-cold freshet you were bragging about, Norton. What time ought we to make our new stop tomorrow?"

"By nine o'clock, easily. You boys can go fishing if you like as soon as we reach the shack. Craig and I will survey and settle camp while you're gone. The brook I told you of is about three miles west of here."

"I'm going to turn in now," Craig announced, yawning. "Steady hiking makes me long for an early bedtime. I'll be glad to spend tomorrow hanging around camp."

"I'm ready to turn in, too." The guide duplicated Craig's yawn. He got to his feet with his usual promptness of action.

"See that you stay-up-all-nights don't keep two poor tired old men awake," Craig laughingly admonished the boys who had not echoed his plea for an early bedtime.

"We'll sing you to sleep," was George's gracious offer.

"Nothing doing." Craig put up protesting

hands. "That means you particularly, George. I don't mind Tony's singing to us, though," he added hopefully.

The other members of the outfit were very fond of listening to Antonio's fine tenor voice. He knew many beautiful Spanish songs of Mexico but he was shy of his talent and could only be coaxed occasionally to sing.

"Go to it, Mejicano." David seconded Craig's hopeful request.

"Yes, don't be stingy with your warbles, *amigo*." Hal put in his plea.

"I solemnly promise not to yowl during the singing." George held up his right hand.

"I solemnly promise to land on him if he does," Kent also took oath.

Thus urged, Antonio sang three or four Mexican songs which the boys had already chosen as favorites. The youngsters listened appreciatively to the tuneful melodies which the Mexican boy voiced so expressively. He ended the little song fest with an old Spanish song called "*Las Estrellas*" [the stars]. This song the boys liked best of his repertoire.

In the midst of the pleasant hush which followed the song the emphatic whinnying of a pony was heard. Instantly every man was on his feet, flash lights in hand, making for the

spot where the ponies were tethered. Keen search on the part of the outfit revealed no cause for alarm, nor were the Long Trailers positive as to which one of the ponies had neighed. All were confident that it had not been Serapis, for Craig's new thoroughbred had not been heard to utter a neigh since he had come into the ranchman's possession.

"False alarm, I guess," Norton finally said. "One of the ponies must have been trying to say he liked the singing."

"Must have been Starlight," Hal instantly claimed, thereby starting the other boys to rooting, each for his own pony.

Adopting Norton's suggestion, the outfit rolled up for sleep nearer the ponies than usual. Night passed uneventfully, however, and the trailers were up next morning with the first streak of dawn, eager to move on to their new camping site.

It was not quite nine o'clock when they rode down a rocky incline, through a green-carpeted mountain pass of a few hundred feet in extension, then up an arid, claylike, rocky steep to the fresh waving green of a broad forest plateau. A heavy growth of large oaks, alders, cottonwoods, and spruces gave the plateau a dense, shadowy appearance. As

the outfit rode on to it and among its tree-lined aisles the trailers found plenty of open spaces between the green limbs overhead through which the sun shone down. When they came to the shack, a small log affair, perched on a knoll, they hailed it with cheers and swarmed it like a company of energetic bees.

"Gam, you're it to go fishing." Hal broke the news to Gam as the China boy came staggering into the shack with a load of packs. "The time has come for you to turn sportsman. No, I'm not going to give Craig and Norton your job. Don't tremble. I'm going to help you fix the stuff. Then away we go!" Hal caught Gam by the arm and gaily ran him halfway around the shack's one room.

"Yes, go with the boys to-day, Gam," Craig said with his usual kindliness. "Norton and I will be home guards. You've stuck to camp very faithfully."

"Stick to me, Misser Fu, and you'll soon be a regular fish hawk," Hal glibly predicted.

"He, he. Me know how to flishee fine," Gam boasted. "Me can catchee more flish anybodee."

"You've said it. Now you'll have to show us. Give me leave to use your trout flies,

Craig? Neither Misser Fu nor Misser Hal has any colored wingers."

"Help yourself."

"Thank you, Misser Craig, thank you." Hal immediately turned his attention to Craig's pack, which held a little box of trout flies.

While he was deep in a selection of flies, Kent stationed himself in the door of the shack with a handful of broken-up fungus. He began pelting Hal industriously as a return for the pelting Hal had recently given him while he had been engaged in a similar task. Hal chuckled to himself, but took care not to turn his head or give sign of objection.

"Gee!" Kent sped the last bit of fungus in his hand with disgusted force. "Didn't know I had a rhinoceros for a target."

Thwack! A pair of rubber sneakers tied in one, hit Kent in the small of the back as he was going out the door of the shack. This time Kent played rhinoceros.

"I dropped a pair of sneakers out the door this morning," Hal said to Kent with vague politeness as the fishermen were presently leaving camp to go fishing. "If you should happen to see 'em—you know me, Al."

"Sure, I know you," Kent returned without

enthusiasm. "I didn't see 'em. I only felt 'em. I gave 'em to George. He said he needed a pair. He said he'd adopt 'em as his own, and treat 'em kindly."

"*Not that pair,*" Hal instantly objected. "That twosome belongs to Craig. Hey, George, you can't adopt Craig's sneakers. There's a law against it."

"Who said anything about Craig's sneakers?" George hurried to defend his newly acquired sneakers with a loud voice.

Brimming with high spirits the six comrades of the trail rode out of camp shattering the hush of the bright forest morning with their buoyant racket. They were soon traveling a narrow greenwood trail leading straight west to the trout stream which Norton knew.

Before starting from Sweet Water on the trip Hal had presented Gam Fu with an outfit of corduroy shooting clothes like those of his own and his chums. Gam was gratefully proud of the clothes, but could not get used to a sombrero. He rode either bare headed or else wore one of the small white duck hats which matched his duck house suits. Hal frequently told the China boy that he looked "as classy on Spice in that hat as a fellow in a derby riding a bike."

"This looks like the real thing!" Kent called out as the horseback procession turned off the trail to cross the fairly level forest land to where a stream rippled noisily over a stony bed, forming clear, deep pools which in turn overflowed themselves into fresh ripples.

"*Si.* Plenty of trout in it, I believe." Tony was first off his pony. He let Hidalgo stand, he himself running forward to the edge of the brook for a first look at it. He returned immediately to where the others had dismounted. "Let us tether the ponies, here," he said, "so they will be near enough to us to be seen all the time we are fishing."

"I'm here to hand you deep-sea fish grabbers a piece of advice," Hal said as the fishermen headed for the brook after having tied their ponies. "Keep quiet. Mustn't talk. The fish don't like it. They can't talk, you know. It makes 'em nervous to hear anyone else blither. It makes 'em jump right out of the water."

"Remember that yourself," David advised as he began to unwind his line for a cast into the deep sunlit pool which he had chosen as a fishing ground.

The fishermen scattered along the banks

of the mountain stream at intervals of only a few yards apart. Soon quiet, necessary to success in trout fishing, settled down upon them. There were, indeed, plenty of trout, but they were wary. The larger they were, the greater seemed to be the amount of caution they displayed. They swam indolently free in the clear water, disdaining the bright bobbing flies on its surface.

This time Fortune evidently singled George for luck. He pulled in trout after trout until he had a string well filled with the speckled beauties. His comrades had no such luck. George, the last one in the line, fishing downstream, could not resist the temptation to crow over the others. He gleefully laid down his tackle to go parading up the line, exhibiting his catch and loudly praising himself.

"I struck it right," he told David exultantly. "Last down the line but not least! Some little fish charmer!" He patted his own chest.

"Wish I was. Last up the line, I'm a fish flivver." David ruefully indicated his own catch of not more than half a dozen small trout. "Going to start another string?"

"Nope. I have a heart. I'll leave a few fins for you. I'm going to frisk around by

myself and hunt bandits. If I capture old Hawknose, I'll let you have him for bait. Here; take my fish bouquet to look at. It may give you ambition." George poked the string of trout toward David with a generous air.

"You could catch fish on your nerve." David took the string of trout and made a threatening swing with it at George.

"Bye-bye." George flapped a derisive hand in the air and hustled off toward the spot where the ponies were tethered. He loosed Puff, swung into the saddle, and urged the pony into a quick trot through the level forest stretch to the left of the stream.

David was about to call after George, "Where away?" when a jerking at his own line claimed his attention. He hastily laid George's trout string on a near-by mossy spot under a tree to pull in the largest trout he had secured thus far. He added it to his string with a murmur of satisfaction. Whipping his line into the water again, he momentarily forgot his former intention to move to George's abandoned fishing stand. It seemed as if George might be a fish charmer, was David's smiling reflection as he hauled in a second trout shortly after recasting his line. He

waited patiently for twenty minutes for another nibble. None came.

"Here's where I move on," he said. Drawing in his empty line he picked up his string of fish from the grass at his right. Making a half turn, he reached down mechanically for George's string, but his groping hand touched only the spongy moss. There was no string of fish reposing upon it.

"What in Sam Hill? Oh, I see." David's surprised face broke into smiles. "No, Georgie, you can't kid me." Laughing to himself, he left the unproductive fishing ground and tramped down the line. Each boy he passed had a pleasantry to fling at him.

"My, you're a quiet bunch!" he jeered to Tony who was now the last man downstream since George had deserted. He seated himself in George's place, still smiling. George would presently appear and demand the string of fish he had slipped up behind David and stolen. He would undoubtedly set up a noisy outcry when the fish string was not forthcoming. David chuckled as he decided what was likely to happen then.

It was nearly noon with a hot July sun high in the sky when the crackle of brush and the light sound of a pony's feet on the uneven

ground brought the eyes of the five fishermen to bear simultaneously upon the approaching rider.

"You should rubber. It's only Misser George." George greeted the fishermen in a high, jocular treble. He continued to talk genially in the same high, affected key as he rode Puff up and down the fishing line.

David was waiting with an anticipative grin for George to "yowl." No yowl came. When George reached him he merely grunted, "Fish good. Big catch. Ugh," and headed Puff toward the other ponies. Instead of dismounting, he reined in at the edge of the group of ponies. He chirruped to them, but kept on riding past them in an easterly direction.

"Hi, there, lazy man. Come back. Fix fish. No work. No eat. Carry that in your nut," Hal shouted after him.

George waved his hand airily and promptly disappeared from view around a clump of scrub oak. Hal planned to ignore George when he should return. Ten or fifteen minutes later he heard Silverheels whinnying. Believing George had returned he did not look toward the ponies. Silverheels whinnied again, a sharp, imperative call.

"Don't like a lazy man, do you, Boy?" Hal could nor resist this fling at George. Laughing, he glanced toward the ponies. "Ya-a-a-a!" A prolonged, enraged howl burst from his throat. Leaping to his feet, he made headlong dash toward the ponies, shouting as he ran.

CHAPTER XVI

A Troublesome Fish

THAT fierce, resentful yell startled his comrades into instant action. What Hal was seeing they now saw. A dark-faced, wild-eyed man with matted black hair and a long, black mustache had Silver-heels and Hidalgo by their bridles and was trying to lead them away. The next second the four boys beside the brook had dropped their tackle and were tearing madly after Hal, who was gaining on the rustler.

While the man was trying to hold on to Hidalgo's bridle, and at the same time mount Starlight, who was rearing and plunging, the five boys reached him, and swept down upon him. Hal grappled with him a flash ahead of the others. The fellow, growling and showing his teeth like a savage, fought tigerishly to free himself from Hal's gripping arms. Tony jumped into the fight next, in time to prevent the rustler from sinking his teeth into one of Hal's hands. Kent entered third with

splendid half-back force. The fellow stopped struggling and began to mutter in Spanish.

The instant he found the pressure of the three determined pairs of arms relaxing ever so little, he made another desperate break for freedom, but it did not work. Again he subsided, muttering Spanish, and turning his shifty, black eyes up at Antonio. He was of medium height, sturdily built with powerful shoulders and a cruel, wolfish cast of feature.

"No, you are not a shepherd, going about your business." Tony spoke sternly in Spanish. "You are a rustler; a *picaro* [rascal]. You were trying to run off with our cayuses."

"Here," David had left the fray to rummage in one of his saddlebags. He now proffered Tony a wad of thin, tough rope. "Wind him up. I'll help hold him while you tie him. Has anybody else more like this?"

"Me have." Gam felt in his pockets and pulled out of one a fairly long piece of the same kind of rope.

"How, how? That's what I'd like to know," grumbled Hal.

"How, what?" Kent was sharply watching the prisoner.

"How are we going to get him back to camp? I wouldn't trust him pony back.

Besides, there's no pony for him to ride. Why didn't you send us word beforehand that you were coming?" he demanded of the scowling man.

"Gr-r-r-r." The rustler showed fanglike teeth at Hal.

"Can't stand joshing, can you, old man? All right. Give it to you straight. Put your hands behind your back." Hal's voice changed to a tone of unbelievable sternness. The fellow hesitated, then obeyed.

"Three of us must walk back to camp with this fellow, but three can ride," Tony now said. "I have a piece of rope to tie to the rope fastened around this *picaro*. When the other is wrapped about my arm, he cannot run far. You and Kent had better walk at his sides, Hal. Gam, George, and David can ride their ponies, and lead the others. Is this the way to do, *amigos?*"

"Great head," Kent lightly approved.

"Bet your life," declared Hal "Where's George? We'll have to wait for him. He'll blow up because he missed something. Think it knows English?" Hal cast a mocking glance at the glowering prisoner. "I thought he got what I said when I was kidding him."

Tony shrugged. "He is Mejicano of the

very low class. Wait, I will ask him what he is. We shall see what he will say." Tony put several curt questions in Spanish to the rustler. The man shot an ugly glance at him, but said nothing. "I shall yet find out what he is doing such a long way from Mejico. This is the real bandit, Mejicano, I believe. Perhaps he is one of those White Shadow wishes to see." Tony glanced shrewdly at the ruffian as he mentioned the Yaqui chief's name. The man showed no sign of having understood Tony's remarks to Hal in English.

"He's a blamed nuisance," Hal said forcefully. "We'll have to trot him back to camp for the bosses to take a squint at. What'll we do with him then? I'll let Norton answer that question. We may have to pack him along with us till we meet White Shadow. Hard on the Long Trail Boys. This pony snatcher doesn't deserve a summer outing."

While Kent and Tony had been busy roping the rustler, Gam and David had hurried back to the ponies. David stood guard over the little flock of cayuses while Gam went to the brookside and gathered up the boy's fishing tackle. He methodically reduced it to small compass, tied it all together with one of the lines, and bustled back to where David was

waiting for him. Next he collected the partially filled strings of fish, binding them together. Then he weighted himself further with the cooking outfit he had brought.

The appearance and capture of the rustler had driven all thoughts of lunch from the minds of the fishermen. They had intended to build a fire and feast upon fried fish, for Gam had brought along the big frying pan, a can of bacon grease and another of flour, besides biscuits, coffee, and the coffee pot. It was now well toward one o'clock and there was no prospect of lunch in sight for another hour. George was still absent, and the boys had a three-mile hike to make back to camp.

David herded the five ponies together and started them forward. Gam, burdened like a burro, gave David such help as he could in urging the ponies through the woods to the point where the prisoner stood with his guard, his wolfish face black with hatred for his captors.

A resounding whoop, the sharp crackle of breaking brush under a horse's galloping feet announced the tardy return of George. "What's up? Where's the gang?" he began shouting while still some distance away from Gam and David.

"Oh, confound it! Where was I?" he exclaimed disgustedly when he heard what had happened. "I've been all over this neck of the woods and haven't seen a single spiffy thing."

"Catchee one blig flishee. Putee on stling." Gam was highly elated at his share in the capture of the Mexican.

"Uh-h-h," George groaned over what he had missed. "Where's my string of speckles?" he demanded of David. "I'll say it's not with that baby bunch of fins."

"A fish pirate stole it when my back was turned," David made sober answer. "He's in for a ducking in the brook when I get hold of him."

"Is he?" George made a motion as though throwing something heavy into the brook. "Quit your kidding, or I'll throw you in after him."

"Quit yours, or you may hit the ripples first," David flung back.

"Not to-day. Spill the truth about my speckles. Where are they?"

"How should I know. You saw them last."

A loud halloo from the group ahead among the trees reached the ears of the arguers. "Coming," answered George at top voice,

"*when I get my fins.*" He wagged a threatening head at David and advanced upon him.

"How can you collect that fish string from me when you grabbed it the minute my back was turned?" As David wheeled to go to the others, he threw a laughing glance at George.

"*Wha-at?* I never did. I never touched it after I handed it to you." It had begun to dawn upon George that David was really serious.

"You *didn't?*" David now showed marked surprise. "Then who nabbed it from the bed of moss where you laid it, under that tree? I thought you sneaked up behind me and took it for a joke."

"Oh, thunder!" The "yowl" George sent up was dismal instead of accusing. "Somebody's been around here besides the scenery. Oh, my lovely speckles! I'll bet this fellow you downed stole my fish. Come on. Let's after him. Something may drop into the brook yet. Give me some of your excess baggage, Gam." George relieved Gam of the bundle of tackle and raced Puff over to the group of trailers.

After George returned the fishermen got under way at once with their sullen prisoner.

He looked as though he would have liked to refuse to walk a step, but did not dare rebel. Anyhow, he was too securely tied and guarded to make another attempt toward freedom. He therefore plodded sullenly along, his wild dark eyes roving incessantly from one side of the trail to the other.

It was a slow hike, seeming even more slow because the six boys were hungry. The trio on the ponies would have liked to ride ahead to prepare Craig and Norton for what was coming, but the boys had agreed instead to keep together for fear the rustler might have pals in the bushes who would come to the prisoner's aid if he were insufficiently guarded.

It was three o'clock when the fishing party arrived at camp with their ill-favored catch. Norton and Craig were out in front of the shack, smoking their pipes in the sun and stretched at ease on the dry ground.

"You certainly have dragged home something," the guide said ironically after he and Craig had listened to the boys' lively account of the rustler's capture.

"We certainly have," Hal agreed half crossly. "A fine slowpoke hike we've had bringing him here. He'll be a bird to lug along with the outfit."

"One blig flishee. No can cook." Gam raised his hands in comic dismay.

"Nope. We can't roll him in flour and fry him in hot grease, or bake him on a board," grinned Hal, his breath of ill humor vanishing.

The peculiar, half-startled glance the rustler threw at Hal furnished proof that he understood English, if not Hal. Hal caught its import instantly and burst into a hearty laugh, his comrades joining in his merriment.

"No, Chester, you're still on the civilized side of the border," he assured the glowering Mexican. "You're safe from the frying pan."

"I wish to goodness he was on the other side of it," Norton said, frowning. He and Craig had risen from the ground and come forward to give the Mexican a thorough looking over. "I see you relieved him of a big knife, but not of a gun. Don't doubt he has one cached. He's a typical Mex bandit. That goes to show there is a band of them roaming this region. Hereafter, boys, tote your guns wherever you go, even if it is only a few rods away from camp."

"Speak English?" Craig asked the Mexican tersely.

"No." The prisoner jerked his rough-maned head. "*No comprendo* [I do not understand]."

"Go tell that to the birds," Hal cried in derision.

The fellow gave Hal a murderous look, his black eyes darting from one to another of the group. Then he mumbled a few words in Spanish to Antonio, who replied in several short stressful sentences.

"He says if you will set him free he will go away and not try to do us any harm," Tony translated, his accent contemptuous. "He is not one to be believed at all."

"Ask him what he did with my string of fish," George demanded indignantly.

George's request met with laughter. Tony complied with it, receiving an angry gobble of Spanish from the man by way of answer. "He says he has no fish; that you are making fun of him and he hates all of us," Tony announced.

"No use in trying to talk to him," was Craig's opinion.

"I see where the outfit will have a picnic looking after him. I don't know what else we can do," Norton said. "To run him in we'd have to go clear back to High Ledge. Besides, he may belong to the very gang White Shadow is after. We'd better stay here only a couple of days, instead of the

week we'd planned, then push ahead for Emerald Valley. He can be safely put away there till White Shadow comes back."

This argument while sound was not welcome to the boys. They had already made their plans for a week's stay at the new camping site and they were not anxious to change them, particularly on account of a Mexican bandit. Their allegiance to White Shadow demanded first consideration. Consequently they agreed to a man and without a dissenting murmur with Norton.

"Me getee lunch," Gam announced with sturdy energy, separating himself from the group standing near the prisoner. Remembering their hunger the boys set to work to build Gam a cook fire. He and David dressed the trout, and the China boy soon had a panful of the delicious browned fish sizzling over the fire.

Antonio had already taken the large knife away from the rustler, and Norton now searched him for other concealed weapons but he found none. The man was wearing an old pair of dark trousers, a grayish cotton shirt, no socks, and a pair of dilapidated rubber-soled shoes. The guide unwound the ropes with which the boys had tied up the prisoner

and retied only his feet and hands in a clever fashion which he knew was warranted to hold. He then left the Mexican under Craig's watchful eye while he scouted about for a suitable place in which to keep the unwelcome guest.

Following his attempt to glean information from the Mexican, Tony had gone to his usual self-appointed task of looking after the ponies. He ran them over to a grassy spot he had picked for them on arrival at the site. Near it were plenty of trees to which to tether them. That morning before starting for the trout brook he had seen Norton's horse, Prince, and Craig's Serapis, settled there.

As he came up with the drove of ponies belonging to the boys he missed the familiar creamy beauty of Craig's thoroughbred. Prince was quietly nibbling a tuft of juicy grass. Where was Serapis? Tony's trained eyes darted from point to point of the tree-lined level below the shack in an effort to pick out the horse. It was possible that Serapis had broken his halter and strayed a little. Look as he might, he could not locate the horse among the trees. Perhaps Craig had been riding the thoroughbred during the boys' absence, or maybe the ranchman had tethered him elsewhere.

"Señor Craig!" Tony came hurrying up the side of the broad knoll on which the shack stood, his dark, vivid features full of anxiety.

"What's the matter, Tonums?" Craig was instantly all attention for he read trouble in Antonio's face and voice.

"Serapis; where is he? Have you tied him elsewhere, Señor Craig?"

"I certainly have not." Craig sprang up from the ground in alarm. "Isn't he over there with Prince? I saw him there when you fellows came up with the Mex." Without waiting for an answer Craig legged it to the spot where the two horses had been tethered. News of the disappearance of Serapis had driven all thought of the prisoner from the ranchman's mind.

Behind the shack Gam was serving fish to a hungry crowd of which the guide made one. Believing Craig to be guarding the rustler, the guide had not been able to resist a second luncheon of crisp, fried trout.

In front of the shack the prisoner watched Craig and Antonio rush off toward the ponies, his shifty, black eyes glittering with a sudden fierce joy. His gaze traveled quickly to the wilderness on the right of the shack. Some-

thing he saw among the green arrested and held his attention for a moment or two. Then he lay down flat on the ground, rolling over and over down the right-hand side of the knoll. He landed on the level, but managed to roll himself on a little further under a clump of low bushes.

"My horse is gone! Serapis is gone!" Craig suddenly shot around a corner of the shack, shouting his loss to the astonished group seated about the white oilcloth.

A babel of sympathetic voices greeted Craig's frantic shout. It brought the boys to their feet. They surrounded Craig with a volley of excited questions.

"Come on. I'll show you right where he was, the last I saw of him." Craig was agitatedly beckoning the boys to follow him. Tony had run back again to the ponies, fearful lest they might be in danger.

Norton ran with them to the place where Craig had last seen Serapis. Not until he was on the scene and had listened to Craig's further excited narration did he remember the prisoner. Bolting from the group, he ran to the knoll. It was no wonder Craig had forgotten the captured rustler.

The guide cried out in pure chagrin as he

reached the knoll. The captive had disappeared. Rushing down the right side of the knoll the woodsman began a keen search of the very clump of bushes under which the Mexican had managed to roll himself, but he was not there now. Norton ran about, eyes to the ground, like a hunting dog searching for a lost scent. He continued to hunt, beating up every inch of the territory as he went. He was not searching for the rustler; he was searching for proof of his suspicions, now fully aroused.

"Where's the Mex?" Kent had followed the guide to the knoll and found neither him nor the prisoner on it. He had spied Norton, bobbing in an out among the bushes, and raced to him.

"You tell me. It's the first time I ever was fooled by that trick, though I've known it to be played more than once." The guide's answer was full of humiliated vexation. He was not looking at Kent, but at a ragged piece of thin, tough rope which he held in one hand.

"What trick? What do you mean?" Kent questioned with sympathetic excitement. "How did the fellow get away so slick? Oh-h, I begin to see!" Kent had grasped the situation.

"He didn't work the trick alone. Some one in the bushes helped him. The king brain of the bandit gang, I'd say. Serapis was stolen since you brought the Mex into camp. The bandit in the bush had a double axe to grind. He was after Serapis, and he also wanted to raise a stampede about him so as to give the prisoner a chance to escape. He's managed to signal the Mex in some slick way to be on the lookout for a rescue."

"Great guns, we were easy!" Kent exclaimed. "Still, I'd not believe his pals bold enough to quit cover and come clear up to the shack to cut him loose. He couldn't have walked away by—"

"He didn't walk away," Norton cut in decisively. "He rolled down the knoll, and as far as he could under the bushes. His pal did the rest. We've been followed from the start by Mex bandits. These bandits are up here to try to find the Yaqui silver mine. Craig crossed their chief's trail when he bought Serapis. That robber is after the mine, and Serapis, too. This Spanish Mexican, Crespero, who sold Craig the horse, may be at the bottom of the whole business. He may be in league with the bandits."

CHAPTER XVII

Circumstances Alter Cases

THE rest of the outfit came running to the foot of the knoll just as Kent and Norton emerged from the bushes.

"What's doing? Where's sour face?" Hal was first to miss the prisoner. "What are we going to do about Serapis?"

"Sour face skidooed. Nothing's doing. It's been done." The guide made a conclusive gesture.

"The ungrateful brute! After all the pains we took to get him here! He was tied up like a bouquet. Did he walk off on his head?" Hal's tone was one of flippant amazement. The others received the news with exclamations of surprise.

"I'm to blame for that," Craig said contritely. "Norton depended upon me to watch the fellow, but I lost my head when Tony ran up to tell me about Serapis. I had no business to leave him alone. I thought he was trussed so that he couldn't make a getaway."

"He rolled down the knoll and into the bushes. He couldn't have vamosed without help, though," Norton repeated to the impressed listeners what he had said to Kent.

"Have we got to stay back and let those confounded brigands walk off with Craig's gilt-edged cayuse?" Hal demanded forcefully. "Have a heart, Norton. Say we can go after 'em." An echoing murmur went up from his chums.

"Which way would you go?" Norton returned. "We'd all have to go in one direction, if we should start out to trace Serapis," he added, without waiting for an answer to his question. "We're too few in number to divide into two search parties. Remember what happened to White Shadow's four Indians. There may be a dozen or so of these brigands in the offing."

"Think they'd have the nerve to jump us as an outfit?" David asked.

"It would depend entirely upon circumstances. Don't doubt they know we're well armed and could put up a good fight. They might not care to venture an attack upon the bunch. If you separate into groups you'd soon see what would happen," the guide said with an ominous shake of the head. "They

have Serapis. From what happened to-day I should say this fellow who escaped had been sent to steal Starlight and Hidalgo, while others of his bandit gang were hanging around camp to nab Serapis. Craig and I could see Serapis plainly from where we were sitting on the ground."

"This *picaro* may have had the pal with him near the brook. When we captured him, the other may then have slipped away to give the news to the one or two who were hiding near the camp," was Tony's surmise. "These bandits are the ones to travel fast on foot through the forest. They can run like the wild animal."

"I'll bet he had a partner. It was his partner who got away with your string of fish." David turned to George.

"You're a brilliant thinker, Davy." George beamed upon David in sham admiration. "I call it punk luck to lose my fancy bunch of speckled fins to old Hawknose's gang."

"I don't want you boys to take risks trying to trail Serapis," Craig gave out very positively. "I think our best plan will be to leave it to White Shadow to handle this gang. He has the men and the will to do it. We stand ready to help him, if it comes to a fight

between his men and the bandits. Think we'd better break camp in the morning and hit the trail again?" Craig asked the guide.

"Um-m." Norton thoughtfully rubbed his chin. "We might stay here one day longer and see what happens. I'm not afraid of an attack. Day after to-morrow we'll hit the trail for Emerald Valley with only over-night stops till we reach there. It will take a week of steady traveling to do that. Once we're there I want you fellows to wait in the valley while I go outside and do a little scouting."

"Oh, Christmas, what a frost!" went up from Hal. His chums echoed his dissenting cry. "Why so stingy of the pleasure of your own company?"

"Because I can do better alone. I want to make a quick scouting trip to try to find out how many of these rascals there are, and what they're up to. Alone, I can keep out of their sight. I'll go on foot. I'm good for twenty-five miles a day over these trails, daylight hiking."

"That settles it." Hal disappointedly emphasized his remark with a forceful slap of the hand on George's shoulder.

"That doesn't, but this does." George returned the slap, double force.

"White Shadow and Agunta are not among these mountains," Antonio said suddenly, and with positiveness of belief. "They must have gone quickly to Mejico. Not on ponies; on the trains."

"Probably," Norton agreed. "You mean they went straight to Mexico after they left our camp that morning to get the rights of things at that end of the line?"

"*Si*," Tony replied, nodding. "They will find out in two or three days what it might take a scout as clever as Señor Hamden many weeks to learn. An Indian is keener on the trail than a white man. But the Yaqui Indian!" Tony paused impressively. "The Yaqui is the wisest of all Indians. He has the natural gift of the seeing eye. Not to see only with these eyes"—Tony lightly touched one of his own eyes—"but to see with the eyes of the mind. They are wise, too, to read the hearts of men."

"Yes, I've heard a good deal of their strong powers of intuition," Craig said. "There are not many full-blooded Yaquis now. White Shadow is the flower of his race. He's the finest Indian I ever saw."

"Do you think Agunta is wiser than White Shadow?" David asked Antonio.

"No. Agunta has lived long and seen much. He has forgotten nothing he has seen. So he is wise in that. He has the quick intuition too. But he also has the quick temper." Tony raised expressive eyebrows. "Sometimes it causes him to make the mistakes. White Shadow is like the deep, still water. No man knows his depth. His mind is for justice in all things. He makes no mistakes. In Mejico he will search out the truth about these bandits. Then he will hurry to catch up with his men who are on their way back from the border. So he will be ready to strike at the bandits when he comes again to these mountains."

"You've doped it out, Mejicano." Hal's tone of admiration brought a pleased little smile to Tony's lips. "You should flutter, Craig. You'll see Serapis again. What I'd like is to have a foot on the last war trail."

"So would the rest of us. You're not the only brave in the bunch," Kent said regretfully. He cast a half-reproachful glance at the guide.

"Don't look at me like that," Norton laughed. "You remember the time White Shadow took Davy with him and his men when they led the attack against Metanzo's gang, don't you?"

"Sure. What's the point?" Kent inquired.

"The point is this. White Shadow wouldn't let Davy carry a gun. He'd be just as much against you boys mixing in a fight this time. If we don't meet him before we reach Emerald Valley, it's into the valley for you boys. That's flat."

"Then I hope we meet him," Kent said so solemnly that everyone laughed.

"You comee getee." Gam had been moving about uneasily at the edge of the circle, waiting for a chance to speak. He was determined that the outfit should return to its half-eaten luncheon. "Me put more fishee in flying pan. Is now hotee. Cloffee hotee, too. Me velly mad you don't comee long."

"Think of that! I'd hate to have *you* mad. You might poison the grub. Comee long yourself." Hal grabbed the China boy by an arm and rushed him around the shack to the deserted oilcloth.

The conference thus interrupted, the others followed the pair to the space behind the shack. As soon as they had seated themselves about the oilcloth again, the conference was renewed and it continued spiritedly for an hour or more. The sight of the sun, a fiery

scarlet sphere, low in the west, informed the trailers of the lateness of the hour.

"We'll be a meal shy this day," George said as they finally rose to follow Norton's suggestion that they separate, each one of them to patrol camp in a given direction for a distance of two hundred yards.

"We'll never miss it," Kent declared lazily, stretching his arms. "I'm going to bed early tonight. Going to post a guard, Norton?"

"Yes, and you boys are to sleep in the shack tonight. That means *you*, Hal. I wish you'd bring the ponies up nearer the shack before dark, Tony. I'll stand guard tonight until two o'clock. We'll draw lots to see who'll spell me, from two till sun-up."

"Shucks. What's the use of sleeping in the shack just one night. We'll *have* to sleep in the open tomorrow. Why not tonight? What difference does one night make?" Hal grumblingly questioned.

"Play safe when you can. While we happen to have a shelter let's make use of it," Norton answered with a patient obstinacy which Hal knew could not be broken down. "Go now before dark and show yourselves good woodsmen. Size up every foot of your territory."

The Long Trailers scattered to their various details, each armed with his rifle. One by one they returned to the shack with nothing to report save that the bushes were broken down, here and there, as if some one had been hiding among them. With dark they formed their usual evening circle in front of the shack. There was no camp fire that evening for the guide vetoed building one. As it was an unusually warm night for that high altitude the boys were willing to dispense with the cheery blaze for once. They lounged on the dry ground on their spread ponchos under the stars' twinkling lamps, exchanging joking pleasantries and listening to Craig's and Norton's stories of their many adventures over the world.

The next day dawned uneventfully. It promised to prove rather slow for the boys as there was nothing special to do. They spent part of the morning cleaning their rifles. Hal proposed they should take the guns out in front of the shack where they would be conspicuously in sight and shoot at a target. He argued that it would show any bandits who might be lurking near camp that the Long Trail Boys were good marksmen.

He was the first to finish cleaning his rifle

so he set to work to make a target of a piece of white pasteboard box which had once held cakes. He tacked the target against a tree and for a bulls-eye stuck the scarlet sign in the middle of the circle of white pasteboard. The boys were only too willing "to take a shot at Jonah." They cheerfully plugged it full of bullet holes. Still the square wooden foundation held together. When Hal finally took it down it was still a square, though thoroughly perforated.

Three times during the day and once more shortly before dark Norton let the boys each patrol his two hundred yard stretch. After each of these patrols the young woodsmen returned to the shack with nothing new to report.

Craig did guard duty that night in Norton's place, and was relieved at two o'clock by George who drew the longest slip this time. Tony and Gam were up of their own accord an hour before daylight the next morning loading the burros. By the time it was broad daylight they had finished the loading and all was in readiness for the start. Gam browned a frying pan full of corned beef hash which he had prepared the night before. This, with coffee and biscuits, made an appetizing and substantial breakfast.

The China boy was a hero that morning, much against his will. He had come to Craig the previous evening insisting that the ranchman should ride Spice. "Me ridee burree," he had explained. "Me put allee things on three burrees. Me ride ozzer one. You mus' have horsee, Misser Claigee."

Gam had shown such active distress over Craig's lack of a horse that the ranchman accepted the thoughtful offer, as much to please the China boy as for his own convenience. Hal had immediately hailed Gam as "our Chinese horseless hero," and "our chop chop benefactor." He had insisted upon escorting Gam, giggling and squealing protests to the burro he was going to ride.

"Shall we do our little patrol stunt once more before we kiss this place good-bye?" Hal was about to get into saddle when the idea occurred to him. "Some one besides the birds may be on the job to see us vamos."

"Go ahead. Gam and I will stay here with the ponies," Norton gave consent. "I'm sorry to break camp like this. I'd calculated on spending a week here; maybe longer. It's hard to find a shack in these mountains. A shack's never amiss when it rains and as a place to keep supplies."

The five boys and Craig hurried off on their detail. They were anxious to be through with it and take the trail again. Though they had all regretted leaving what had promised to be good hunting and fishing ground, they had made ready to go. Consequently they were impatient to be gone.

The last one among them to return to the spot where the ponies and burros were standing was Antonio. He came loping toward the group of men, his whole bearing indicating excitement. "Go and see what is over there where we first tied the ponies," he called, beckoning with a wide sweep of one arm. "You go, Señor Norton. I will stand by the ponies."

"What is it?" George squinted doubtfully at Tony. "You certainly ought not to kid Señor Norton, but you—"

"*Adelante* [Go and see]," Tony cried with forceful impatience.

"Add-e-lantey is my middle name." George hustled after Kent and David who were already on the way to the spot Tony had designated.

Craig, Hal, and Norton brought up a hurrying rear. As they neared the spot, the eyes of the six men moved sharply from point to

point in an effort to pick up what Tony had seen. They all discovered it at the same instant, and cried out almost together. It was tacked to a huge-trunked cottonwood tree—a vivid, scarlet splotch against the dark background of the tree. The tack which pinned it to the tree was a knife blade with only a part of a broken handle.

"We simply can't lose you, can we, Reddy?" Hal made an ironic bow to the scarlet sign.

"By George! Freako seems anxious to let us know he is on the job!" Craig exclaimed. "This is the strongest proof we could have that Freako and these bandits are partners."

Craig's exclamation brought forth a hubbub of conjecture from the group gathered around the big cottonwood.

"Watch me gather it in." Hal reached out for the sinister scarlet square. "I need a new S. S. The other one is all shot to pieces." He loosened the knife from the square and pocketed the sign with a grim. "I think I'll just stick up the shot one in place of this. Thank you, Freako, old Hawknose, or whatever your name may be. Now for the shady work! Give me a leaf from that little blank book you carry, Craig, and let me take your fountain pen."

Craig promptly complied with the request. Hal borrowed the notebook, too, bracing it against a tree and laying upon it the leaf which Craig had torn from it. He wrote on the leaf, placing the paper behind the much perforated sign which the boys had used for a target. He then laid them against the tree trunk, at a height of about five feet from the ground, and tacked them to the tree with the broken-handled knife. Above the bullet-riddled scarlet sign three words stood out clearly on the bit of paper. They were: "Ping! Stung! Porous!"

CHAPTER XVIII

"Go It, Star!"

FOR the whole of the next week, following their departure from the camping site where Serapis had been stolen, the Long Trail Boys stuck steadily to the trail, traveling by day and making camp for the night only. They had won across the mountain on which Craig had met with the loss of his thoroughbred, trailed down its opposite side and ascended the next mountain. It was higher and more ruggedly wild of scenery than any other they had thus far climbed. Only one more mountain of the range lay between the one they were now traveling and Emerald Valley.

During that week of steady, pleasant traveling under sunny, cloudless skies there had been but one suspicious occurrence. Even that had been so vague as to leave the Long Trail Boys in doubt as to whether it had really happened.

Riding single file on the first day of their climb up the mountain, Hal had heard some-

thing whizz past his face. It sounded to him unmistakably like the speeding hum of a bullet. He had not seen anything. Still he had distinctly felt something fan his face as it brushed past him. There had been no sound of a shot. That fact in itself appeared to point to the suspicion that the bullet, if it were a bullet, had been fired from a revolver equipped with a silencer.

As a matter of precaution, Norton had posted a guard each night. He had divided the night into two watches and paired off the outfit accordingly for guard duty. Even Gam Fu had insisted upon doing his share. He made an alert, wide-awake sentinel. The Long Trail Boys liked to do night guard duty because it further trained them as scouts. What they did not like was the restriction upon their comings and goings by day from camp. They missed the little jaunts away from camp which the guide had formerly permitted them to make singly, or by twos and threes.

"Oh, Gee! I wish White Shadow would hit this territory with his bunch of Indian scrappers and clean up the bandits," David said vengefully one cloudy morning as the outfit was getting ready to break the night camp

and move on. "This would have been a pretty good place to stick for a couple of days. There's lots of grass for the ponies, and we could have put up a dandy big lean-to with that rock there for a back wall. It's going to rain. Did you know it? I suppose we'll be right out to catch it when it begins to pour."

"Oh, we may be lucky enough to find cover if it rains." Something in Norton's tone made David glance questioningly at his uncle.

"What do you know about it?" he asked with playful accusation. "What have you up your sleeve?"

"Take a good look around you and maybe you'll discover something; you only think you don't know," his uncle laughingly advised, turning twinkling eyes upon his nephew.

David obeyed. "Hanged if I can discover anything. What is it?"

"Ask Kent. See if he can help you to find out." Norton included Kent in an amused glance.

Kent and David exchanged questioning glances.

"Oh, you two are thick." Hal had already caught the guide's meaning. So had Antonio. George was too busy informing Gam Fu that he thought he would loan Puff to the China

boy for the day and ride Gam's burro himself, to pay any attention to the others. Gam had no ambition to ride Puff and was delighting George with a stream of dismayed protests.

"Isn't there anything familiar to you fellows about this region?" Norton continued to quiz the puzzled pair.

After a minute or two a broad smile began to dawn upon Kent's face. "I've got it," he said with a triumphant snapping of fingers. "Hurry up, Davy."

"I know now." Light had broken upon David. "We are about a mile from the camp we had on the plateau, summer before last, when Kent was lost and I ran away," he declared.

"Righto. Not quite so bright as Little Brent, but pretty fair, Whit; pretty fair," Hal assured him with patronizing heartiness.

"I saved this bit of news as a surprise for you fellows. I thought we'd enjoy making camp again on the same old plateau," Norton told his flock. "There's good grazing for the ponies. Another advantage, it is open enough on three sides so that no bandits can come nearer than two hundred yards without our seeing them. There's the rocky cavern at the back of the level for shelter if it should

storm, or in case of a fight. And at the south side of that plateau is a drop of hundreds of feet."

"We are on the last mountain before Emerald Valley now," Tony announced tranquilly. "I knew when we made the change to this mountain late yesterday afternoon."

"You know too much," Kent chaffed. "And you're certainly stingy with your knowledge. Why didn't you tell us just where we were?"

"I am very kind, and not stingy at all. I like to give you the great pleasure of finding out things for yourselves," Tony defended with dancing eyes.

"You mean you are a Mejicano bean keeper," jeered Hal.

"It is better to be thought a bean keeper than to talk too much and then be called a smarty," Tony retorted.

"How long are we going to camp on the plateau?" Kent eagerly quizzed the guide. "While we're there can we go hunting in twosomes and threesomes?"

"Nope; not yet. Remember from the plateau it is only two days' journey to Emerald Valley. It's more than likely that these lawless cut-throats are roosting somewhere on

this very mountain. It may be a case with us of the nearer we come now to the valley the nearer we'll come to their stamping ground."

"Do you think they have any idea of the secret way into the Valley?" Craig asked the guide.

"That's what I'd like to find out. I don't believe they have. You remember White Shadow told us that Agunta had the dead Indians brought into the valley after dark and that all the men who were in the valley then were forbidden to leave it until the chiefs returned from the outside and gave them leave to do so. These bandits would never find out the secret for themselves."

"These bandits are very superstitious," Antonio said. "If they should happen to see the Indian ride under the cascade after dark they would be sure to believe it was the ghost rider. They would be afraid to go near the waterfall. They are fierce and quick to kill, but they have no cunning, and not much sense," he ended with a disparaging shrug of his broad shoulders.

"They must surely know that White Shadow has a big gang of Indians. I should imagine they'd be wary of bucking such an

outfit," Craig said with a reflective frown. "Possibly there are forty or fifty of them up here, waiting to back their chief when he locates the silver mine he's after."

"I believe it is like this, Señor Craig. These *picaros* do not know how many men White Shadow has. Perhaps in Mejico his silver convoy has been often watched by this man, Crespero. He may think, *quizás*, that the Indians who make up the convoy are all the men White Shadow has. Perhaps Crespero has long ago sent two or three bandits to trail the convoy across the border and to these mountains. These fellows have not found out the secret of the waterfall. They are not clever, as I have said. They are fierce, but *estúpido* [stupid]." Antonio was emphatic in his contempt for the general stupidity of Mexican bandits.

"But," he continued with stress, "there is nothing *estúpido* about Crespero. He has probably sent two or three of his men to watch at the border between Arizona and Nevada. As soon as they saw the convoy cross the border from Nevada to Arizona, one of them has sent the telegraph message to Crespero. He has then quickly sent el Halcón and a dozen, *quizás*, of bandits by

railway to a town near these mountains. They have perhaps come here on foot so as to be more secret. Mejicano bandits are like the wild animals. They travel fast on foot. They can slip and slide easily through the forest."

"Good dope, Mejicano," Hal agreed. "They may have got tired of hoofing it. That would account for the way they've tried to run off our cayuses."

"If they should find the way to get into the valley they'd meet with an awful shock the minute they saw the place," Kent predicted.

"*Es verdad*," Tony nodded. "No doubt Crespero has sent these few men to try to find the mine while White Shadow is away. Perhaps a large force of bandits is in hiding near the Mejicano border, waiting to ambush White Shadow's men before they cross back to the United States. If Crespero could have White Shadow killed he might make the pretense in Mejico that White Shadow gave him the mine before he died. He might even say he was the friend of White Shadow. His claim might be honored in Mejico now. He is supposed to be the *influente* planter. There is little justice in my country now for the Indians. Agunta is the very old man, and an

Indian. Crespero might think he could do nothing."

"They'd never put anything over on Great Chief Agunta," Hal stanchly asserted. "He and White Shadow have every little thing about the mine water-tight on this side of the border."

"I'm afraid old Hawknose's dream of a silver mine for nothing will never come true," George said with simulated regret.

"Ay, but he thinks it will," Tony commented satirically. "So thought Metanzo. These bandits do not know what White Shadow is in the United States. If they knew there were as many Indians at the mine as in the convoy they would not be in such a hurry to hunt for the mine."

"You've got their number, Señor Valdez. Your top piece is crammed with juicy wisdom. Hamden has nothing on you. I admire you so much that I'll let you ride front. I'll mind the burries to the next stop," was Hal's gracious offer.

"You think it is sport to make fun of a poor Mejicano." Tony laughed, but his olive cheeks showed a tinge of red. Underneath his bantering words Antonio knew Hal had spoken sincerely. "I only know the wolves of my own country."

"Too bad we hadn't more time to talk this matter out with White Shadow," Craig said regretfully.

"It would help a whole lot if he should happen to breeze along now. Maybe he might find the *picaros* he's after right in our neighborhood. How about it, Star?" Hal tickled one of Starlight's ears.

"Whir-r-r-r!" Starlight answered promptly to Hal's delight. He insisted on making his comrades believe that Star could say five words. "Whir" was one of the five.

"Let's get under way. We'll continue this discussion tonight around the camp fire. When we get to camp we can take it easy for the rest of the day and go over our packs." The guide turned to his horse.

"Yours cordially. My pack needs going over. I can't find a blamed thing I want when I want it," declared Kent.

"I notice you do a good deal of grumbling, but didn't know what the matter was," David threw slyly at Kent.

"You'll know what the matter is if I swing on you," Kent threatened.

Gam and George had already finished loading the burros. They had brought up the ponies before the discussion began. Norton swung into saddle, saying, "All right, Prince."

He had merely to touch rein to start his horse. Hal gaily ordered Tony into line behind Norton. He waited until the others had ridden into line on the narrow trail, then he drove the burros on to it, single file behind the riders. Gam rode on the last of the four burros.

Hal brought up the rear of the procession with a cautioning, "Watch your speed, Misser Fu. That burrie you are riding is a race horse. Don't let him run away with you."

"You know him no runee, Misser Hal. Where him runee? Him don't like walkee. Him nev-ver runee."

"You seem to know his history." Hal continued to talk nonsense to Gam as Starlight carried him slowly along behind the burro train, taking short jerky steps and uttering displeased little whinnies. Like his impetuous master, he loved to run free and was fully as impatient of restriction. Hal dropped back and waited so as to give Starlight a little leeway.

"Judas Priest, this is a crawl to camp instead of a ride," he muttered. "Glad it's going to end soon. I've won the one-mile crawl. I'm the tail end of the whole slow

coach. Guess we'd better admire the scenery, Star. It seems to be the thing to do. Yes, it is bee-utiful." Hal smirked and bowed, left and right. "On the lower side of the trail is the most picturesque drop. Five hundred feet to the next stop at the top of a scrub oak. Nothing left for your friends but memories, Boy. On the upper side of the trail—ahem—the rubbering traveler will be struck by—what would it be nice to have him biffed by, Star?"

Hal's own eyes wandered carelessly over the wilderness of green in search of an object to suit his nonsensical fancy. A sudden violent movement of the bushes back among the trees riveted his eyes upon the tangle of green. Something black and furry was rising from them. Hal saw a black furry shape silhouetted against the green background. Whatever the creature was, it was standing with a side turned toward him. It had a long black tail which gave it the appearance of a weird black monkey. It stood with a thin, hairy arm raised as if it were shading its eyes with a paw. It was gazing through a leafy screen in the direction the outfit had taken. Evidently it had thought Gam Fu the last of the party of riders, and had risen

from where it must have been crouching in the green.

As Hal glimpsed the strange creature it flashed upon his mind that he was seeing, not a monkey, but a human being, masquerading in an animal's skin. The pose of the thing was utterly human. How he wished he had a lariat! He had a piece of thin rope in one of his saddlebags, but it would not be long enough. All this went through his brain in a twinkling. Next instant he was ready to act. Turning Starlight from the trail he urged the pony up the gradual slope of the trail toward the furry mystery.

The same instant in which he turned the pony the creature whirled, turning toward Hal what seemed to be a black featureless blank instead of a face. Before Hal had had time for more than the barest look at it, it was rushing away through the woods at top speed, the dry twigs cracking and snapping under its fleeing feet. Hal let Starlight out and after it. He had forgotten that he was a member of the Long Trail outfit, that Norton had forbidden solitary rides, that the surrounding forest might harbor a horde of bandits. Hal remembered only that he was after the "monkey puzzle" as the boys had named the thing which Gam Fu had described to them.

Though the going was rough, Starlight was gaining fast upon the black apelike fugitive. Hal was surprised that it did not double, make sudden, unexpected turns, or try other ruses of flight. Possibly it was a big black monkey, after all. It went against his judgment to believe it was. Straight north it ran, turning its blank, black excuse for a face over one shoulder at its pursuer. That meant it had eyes, and could use them.

"Ah-h-h!" Hal gave a yell of triumph. He had made another discovery about the speeding black apparition. It had a face; a human face. Of that he was very certain. What he was seeing in place of a face was a black mask. Nor was it an ordinary mask, or a false face. Hal made a shrewd guess that the mask was made of black velvet, and was adjusted so as to give the appearance of an uncanny lack of face. The mask that the furry thing wore was identical with the one he had found in the green knapsack.

Simultaneous with this staggering discovery something else happened. The creature ahead, dodging in and out among the trees, sent up a strange eerie whistle. Twice the black fugitive repeated the call. Suddenly Hal heard a crashing and snapping of dry

brush. He saw the center of a leafy thicket beyond him at the left begin to move violently. The tall bushes and saplings quivered and shook, then parted under the crashing advance of a horse. Out of the thicket it dashed, a magnificent animal, pale tan in color with a flowing creamy mane and tail. Its rider urged the horse forward until it seemed as though he must run down the black furry figure. It was making no attempt to get out of the way of the horse. As the horseman reached the creature he leaned far out from the saddle. The black mystery raised a pair of hairy arms to him. The rider caught the upraised black paws in his hands, swung the thing clear of the ground and in front of him into the saddle.

Hal gave a loud cry of amazement. He was seeing what Kent had seen at Mariposa Ranch on the evening the ill-favored face had appeared at the window, but with this difference, however. On that occasion Kent had seen a very tall man pick up what he believed to be a black dog, and make a quick get-away on foot. This time a horse figured in the bit of woodland drama staged before his astounded eyes. The horse which the tall man was riding was Serapis. What Kent had

mistaken for a black dog Hal was convinced was a human being; either a half-grown child or a dwarf.

Even in that brief moment of action, the rider of Serapis challenged Hal's unwilling admiration. He was indeed a very tall man. Moreover, he was iron strong. His aquiline features were of a dark foreign type. His black riding clothes and black sombrero gave him a curiously distinguished air. He wore neither beard nor mustache, and the expression of his dark face was cruelly predatory. The instant he had picked up the imploring creature, he wheeled Serapis and dashed away into the thicket again. With all his astonishment, Hal was lost in admiration of the man's superb horsemanship. Serapis seemed to belong to him, and he to Serapis.

"El Halcón!" The name burst from Hal's lips in a triumphant shout. The man on Serapis truly suggested his title. It was not in Hal's recklessly brave make-up to turn back. He had but one impulse, and that was to chase the disappearing rider and his strange burden. "Go it, Star!" he shouted, as he urged the pony into a gallop.

Serapis was no swifter of foot than was Starlight. Soon Hal grew confident that he

was gaining on the outlaw. He was certain that the distance between the two horses was narrowing. On he went, oblivious of time and trail. He had previously hunted often enough through this territory to be sure of finding his way later to the plateau on which the outfit was to make camp.

As the chase continued, the landscape grew wilder and more rocky. Serapis' rider put the horse to more than one chasm which the thoroughbred took like a bird. Starlight cleared them, too; strongly; cleanly; with a zest which delighted Hal. He was now exultantly sure that he had gained considerably upon the bandit. His exultation vanished, however, driven away by the disturbing remembrance that the outlaw had not once fired upon him.

At the moment when his brain took up this alarming reflection it was too late to turn back from what he now began to see as a rashly dangerous undertaking. Again he heard the black creature ahead of him give the shrill, weird whistle. The third time the eerie blast rent the air, an answer to it proceeded from a point behind a clump of twisted alders which Starlight was rapidly nearing.

He saw a vigorous agitation of the tall,

interlacing bushes between the growth of alders. He attempted to turn Starlight, but the pony reared on his hind legs, snorting his displeasure rather than fright as half a dozen swarthy, rifle-armed men mobbed the rearing cayuse. They fell upon Hal, who was still sticking to Starlight's back and dragged him kicking and striking furiously from the saddle.

The man that Hal had been recklessly pursuing had ridden back now to the scene of the struggle. He sat Serapis, looking tranquilly on, his expression bleak and merciless. The thing masquerading in the black furry skin had slid from Serapis and was chattering to the tall man on the horse in a language Hal knew was not Spanish, nor any other tongue familiar to his ears.

To his mortification the bandits tied him with a piece of rope which they took from his saddlebag. They took his rifle, went through his clothing, and stripped him of every article his pockets held. When they had finished the looting they stepped back from the discomfited Long Trail boy, their wild black eyes respectfully fixed upon their statuelike chief.

He spoke to them in Spanish in a coldly imperious tone. One of them acted as spokes-

man for his companions. The others preserved a discreet silence. The one who did the talking was the bandit who had tried to steal Starlight and Hidalgo, had been the boys' prisoner, and had escaped at the time his confederates had stolen Serapis.

The bandit chief waved the Mexicans back a little, then trotted Serapis forward until he had brought the horse facing Hal. Then he said sternly and with a slightly foreign intonation: "You called the name, el Halcón. Know you not, el Halcón is long dead?"

CHAPTER XIX

El Halcón

"I'VE been told he was dead." Hal's answer was full of dry sarcasm.

"You do not believe it?" There was a strong hint of anger in the question.

"Nope."

"Why do you meddle with that which concerns you not?" the chief asked after a long pause during which he continued to keep a sinister frowing gaze upon Hal.

"I don't. I have been minding my own business strictly. Start at your own end of the trail," Hal made disdainful reply.

"You are insolent. You must be taught better manners. You shall have a lesson." The bandit's tone had changed from one of cold severity to that of decided irritation. "Take him away." He motioned to the group of swarthy fellows. "Dare to let him escape." They dropped their eyes uneasily under his menacing eyes and harsh speech.

He was about to turn Serapis away from Hal when the masked enigma bounced over

to the horse and assailed el Halcón with a fresh burst of chatter. Hal watched the thing with the utmost curiosity, forgetting for the moment the discomfort of his own situation. Although he refused to regard his capture as serious, he was determined to find a way of escape speedily, and that on Starlight.

Listening to the vehement voice of the black chatterer, Hal soon discovered the outlaw chief was paying a certain amount of unwilling attention to the uncanny thing. He was even putting in an occasional sentence in the same foreign tongue which his strange companion was employing. Several times he shook his head as if gravely deprecating the apelike creature's voluble opinions. The thing repeatedly uttered one short sentence. It went over the sentence at least a dozen times, and in as many different tones. Each time it waved a thin hairy arm toward Hal.

At last the man on Serapis showed signs of weariness with his grotesque companion. Raising a protesting hand he spoke a single sentence in a voice of sarcastic severity. His persistent partner uttered a kind of growling murmur and started off by himself among the trees, soon disappearing from view.

Hal proceeded to engage in another kicking match with the bandits as two of them advanced upon him with a black silk handkerchief. He had recalled Norton's description of the Mexican bandit trick of "throwing the scarf." It took three of his captors to blindfold him. Meanwhile, the chief watched the operation with an immobile face.

Hal exhibited the utmost scorn for his captors as two of them took hold of his arms and led him along on foot. Momentarily he expected to feel the tearing of a bullet through his back. Nevertheless he kept up a coolly brave front. Ahead of him he heard Starlight neigh two or three times. The wise pony was calling him. Each time Star neighed, Hal whistled an encouraging answer to the call, his captors seeming not to object. Hal thought it strange they had not treated him with savage roughness. He had certainly "rough housed" them, but they had not retaliated.

He ventured to try something more daring than a whistle to Starlight. He puckered his lips in a long, piercing whistle, a peculiar sound with which his chums were familiar. Two or three seconds later he felt the grip of pressing merciless fingers on his right arm.

"Whistle thus again, and I will give you to my men for a target," a coldly furious voice informed him. "It is not they who wish to be gentle with you. It is my will that they have been thus."

"I get you, friend Halcón. I hope the first whistle carried to the gang. I'm anxious to live to see you do a dance in the air," Hal retorted with ironic cheerfulness.

"You are a brave young fool. You speak not with mere bravado. You are rash enough for the most dangerous foolishness."

"Glad you've got my number. I'd hate to have you think I had lost my nerve," Hal flung back flippantly.

"I think of you not at all." The retort was full of cold disdain. The pressure on his arm was relaxed. Next instant he felt the lighter though still forceful hold of one of the Mexicans.

Where his captors were taking him Hal could not even guess. He judged the bandits must have some kind of secret hiding place not far from the point where they had attacked him. Meanwhile he kept hoping that the one piercing whistle which he had managed to sound might have been heard by his comrades. Surely they must have discovered by now

that something unusual had occurred to him to keep him away from camp. On first arrival on the plateau they might have thought he had merely lagged behind a little. Later, they would grow uneasy at his absence. He was confident that Norton himself would ride out to search for him.

After what seemed to him to be an hour of swift hiking he suddenly felt the ground begin to grow stony under his feet. His captors jerked him down a short incline, plentifully strewn with jagged pieces of rock. Then he was roughly hauled through a tangle of bushes. Next he was led over what he took to be a very stony arroyo. Blinded as he was, he went the length of the short arroyo, light-footedly, and without stumbling.

His arms, tied behind his back, were aching. The handkerchief bound about his eyes had become painful. To have his vision blotted out even for the time being, was maddening. The sun striking warmly on the back of his neck indicated that it was well toward noon.

His bandit escort brought him to a stop with an abruptness that was jarring. An energetic babble of men's voices in Spanish came to his ears. To his angry despair he felt the sudden tightening of a rope about his

legs a few inches above the ankles. His dejection became complete when he felt himself being lifted from his feet and carried swiftly along. Then he felt a hand busy itself with the handkerchief, and, as the bandage fell away from his eyes, he was deposited none too gently upon a level, rocky floor.

There he lay blinking. His first impression was that it must be twilight. Then he remembered how warmly the sun had shone on the back of his neck within the last few moments. The place in which he lay was dim and shadowy and looked like one of the ancient caves occasionally to be found in the Nevada mountains. It had a remarkably smooth stone floor and was at least eight feet high in the center, though it sloped down gradually toward the back. Hal could not see the mouth of the cave, but light filtered down through two small fissures in its natural roof of up-piled rocks.

What he saw as his unbound eyes accustomed themselves to the twilight of the cave was a furry black shape, sitting cross-legged on the floor. From out of two narrow eyeholes in the peculiarly fashioned mask it wore Hal caught the gleam of eyes. With an exclamation of nettled surprise he managed to

raise himself to a sitting posture. He eyed the apelike figure contemptuously as he said: "Why do you register in the monkey class when you're a human? You certainly must need a disguise."

"I need no disguise. I wear the monkey skin because it pleases me to wear it." A decidedly displeased voice spoke from behind the mask. "You have once seen my face. You shall see it again." The sham monkey swept a hairy hand across the mask, pulling it off.

"*Freako!*" Hal's voice rose to an astonished yell. He was staring in amazement at a pale brown, red-lipped, hatred-filled face with flashing black eyes, framed in a mass of black matted hair—the face he had seen looking in Craig's window.

"I know not what you mean." The strange vengeful face, peering out from the ragged black fur of the ape skin, was that of a man, not a child. Freako was a dwarf. "Be careful what you say to me. If you show me disrespect, I will kill you." The strange creature grew darkly menacing. "I am Rangol, the last Rajah of Bundhar. I have the power of life and death. It was the power of my ancestors, but it became mine. I have

had disrespectful servants put to death more than once."

"Better not try any Bundhar tricks on me," Hal gave succinct warning. He was thinking that Freako amply bore out the name he had given the repellent human oddity. "You'd be pretty likely to attend the execution of Rangol, the last of the Bundhars, *pronto*."

"You are disrespectful enough to die," Freako said angrily, "and there is no sense in your words. How could I attend my own execution?"

"Just untie me for about five minutes and I'll start you on the way to attending it," Hal grimly assured the dwarf.

"I shall *never* untie you." Freako delivered this crusher with displeased emphasis. "What have you done with it?" he asked curiously in the next breath. "I told you to put it on the gate post. I dropped it in the dark under the window of the stable of your friend. El Halcón was angry because he could not loose Serapis and take him away. He would not let me go back for it. It is the Pagoda of the Sacred Monkey, and a great talisman. I have had no good fortune since I lost it."

"You've no one but yourself to blame for losing it," Hal returned unsympathetically.

"Be silent." The dwarf scrambled to his feet and came toward Hal at an angry hop. "I am the one to talk; not you. I am pleased to tell you about my talisman because you will never tell anyone else. You will never live to tell anyone else. El Halcón has said you know too much. He will give you to his men tomorrow for a target, unless I kill you myself. But I am not ready to kill you yet. You shall not die until after you have told me what you have done with my talisman."

"What good will it do you to know where it is? You'll never dare go after it." Hal found a grim satisfaction in thus tantalizing the dwarf.

"I will send one of el Halcón's men for it. First, I shall give you a paper. You will write on it an order for my green knapsack to be given to the bearer of the order. You will sign your name to the order, and then tell me where the knapsack is. You wrote on the paper that you left on the gate post that my knapsack was safe."

"So you read the note I put on the gate post," Hal said satirically.

"Yes. El Halcón brought it to me before daylight. I read it. Then he put it back on the gate post while it was still dark." Having

delivered this information, Freako sat down again on the floor directly in front of Hal and proceeded to look him over with owl-like gravity. His little flurry of anger had evidently subsided, at least for the moment.

"You may think you will not do as I tell you, but at the last you will not be so brave," he predicted darkly. "If you go on defying me I will have el Halcón torture you. I will tell him to roast your feet over a slow fire until you are ready to say where my green knapsack is. It would only make me laugh to see you suffer. I am Rangol, keeper of the scarlet sign. It is the sign of blood. My forefathers made it and dipped it in the blood of their enemies. You are my enemy. You have kept from me what is mine. Perhaps I will torture you myself, and then kill you when I am tired of hurting you."

The vengeful freak leaned forward threateningly toward Hal. Watching the flash of the dwarf's large bright eyes and the vengeful play of his brown features Hal decided that the Rajah of Bundhar was not only a criminal, but a dangerous lunatic as well. Why he should be the boon companion of such a remarkable type of man as was el Halcón, the bandit chief, was a question Hal could not answer.

"How old is the scarlet sign? Is it Chinese?" Hal was resolved to find out what he could about the scarlet insignia while the opportunity offered. He pluckily refused to let his mind dwell upon the very unpleasant program which the mad rajah had mapped out for him. Such threats had an unreal sound, though Hal did not doubt the capacity for cruelty of both the dwarf and the bandit, el Halcón.

"It is old—old—old." The dwarf repeated the word vaguely. "More than four hundred years old. It was the sign of Rangol, the great robber of all robbers in India. He made the sign, and dipped it in the blood of Dalo Singh, his enemy. After that he made it the habit to do this when he killed those whom he hated. So he told his son, Dassah, to do this. After that the sign belonged to every Rangol to redden with an enemy's blood. I am the last of my race. I am the pride of India."

"You don't look it," Hal could not resist saying. In spite of the precariousness of his situation he could not regard the freakish dwarf and his wild statements with any degree of seriousness.

"Er-r-r-r-r." The offended pride of India turned upon Hal with a positive snarl. His

upper lip drew back like that of a cross dog. "And you dared ask me if the scarlet sign of Rangol was Chinese!" Happening to recall Hal's question regarding the scarlet sign the dwarf now treated it as an additional grievance against the prisoner. "I believe I had better kill you myself. Yes, that is the way it had better be. A new sign shall be made and dipped in your blood."

"Not so you could notice it," Hal promptly disagreed. "Gee whiz, you're a pleasant person! Your face and your disposition certainly hook up together, don't they?"

"I do not understand what you say," the mad rajah returned with dignity. "I only know that I hate you. I hated you when I looked through the window glass and saw you. I hate you so much more now that it will be great happiness to kill you."

"I shan't enjoy it," Hal replied grimly. "Go on with your family history. It interests me. Did that black pelt you are sporting belong to one of the Rangols? I'll say it can't be much farther back than your great grandfather."

"I do not know." The dwarf's eyes grew vacant. He dropped into a brown study, appearing to forget Hal's presence, and leaned far forward, arms wrapped about his knees.

Hal had already decided that the skin the dwarf was wearing must have belonged to a good-sized ape. Afterward he found it to have been that of a mandrill. It fitted the bloodthirsty rajah perfectly.

In the midst of the looking-over Hal was giving the dwarf the rajah slowly raised his head. Into his black eyes sprang a wolfish light, changing his whole expression from one of vacancy to fierce displeasure. "What have you done with my talisman?" he demanded harshly. "You have hidden it away. It is not in your pack. Where is it?"

Without waiting for an answer he rose, padded over to one side of the cave and began peering sharply along a projecting ledge of rock, muttering as he moved. Suddenly he snatched up something from the ledge. He whirled, advancing fiercely upon Hal, his right arm raised, his hand grasping a long straight, two-edged knife. "Where is it?" he repeated with menacing surliness, brandishing the knife about Hal's head.

"You can't scare me." Hal kept his eyes steadily upon the threatening black shape with the uplifted knife. The dwarf continued to flourish the weapon, his own unwinking gaze never leaving Hal's face.

Hal had not forgotten the East Indian's anxiety over his lost knapsack. He did not believe the rajah would attack him with the knife unless he allowed his passion for killing to blot out for the moment the remembrance of his plan to regain possession of his talisman. Nevertheless, the Long Trail boy was inwardly fuming at his own helplessness against his freakish tormentor.

At a side of the cave farthest from Hal was the cave entrance. It was so darkly swathed in shadow that Hal had not been able to determine it from his cramped position on the cave floor. Neither he nor the dwarf saw a doubled form straighten itself in the shadowy dusk of the opening. Neither saw a tall, gliding figure draw nearer and nearer to them.

Hal became aware of a third presence in the cave only an instant before the newcomer sprang upon the grotesque, skin-clad creature from behind, launching itself upon the dwarf with the lithe strength of a puma springing from a tree limb. He gave a wondering rejoicing shout of "White Shadow!" It echoed and reëchoed through the rocky cavern.

A man of ordinary strength would have found the mad dwarf a formidable antagonist. What the bloodthirsty rajah lacked in stature

he made up in rage and sheer ferocity. He thrashed, snapped and snarled like a cornered wild beast in the Yaqui's relentless grasp. Hal yelled with thankful approbation when White Shadow finally subdued the dwarf, sat down on the rajah's prostrate form and reached into the pocket of his riding coat. He brought from it a pair of thin steel handcuffs. Evidently he had come prepared to make a capture. He snapped the handcuffs upon the wrists of his enraged captive. Next he tied the dwarf's feet with a piece of stout rope from the same pocket.

"I come in good time, *hermano*." The Yaqui chief sprang up from his task and retrieved the knife which he had sent spinning from the dwarf's hand to the cave floor. Quickly severing Hal's bonds he raised him to his feet and shook the Long Trail boy by the hand.

"Better believe you did, Emperor! Things were getting pretty spiffy on this side of the cave!" Hal exclaimed gratefully. "You're the last one I'd have thought would be my rescuer."

"I have seen the Little Father. Hear you don't come back plateau. Meet him and your *hermanos* in woods. They are here.

Come hunt you. Shy Beaver, Agunta with them."

"Great work! I'm strictly to blame for getting myself into this mess, Emperor," Hal admitted ruefully. "The dwarf is bad medicine. He thought he would let me live until I told him where his blamed old talisman was. But he was getting pretty bloodthirsty. Hard to tell what he might have done."

"This is an evil thing." White Shadow bent a stern glance upon the dwarf who lay at his feet, still muttering and snarling. "All is done, Little Brent. We have caught el Halcón. He don't die long ago."

"Bet your boots he didn't," Hal laughed. "He was certainly a live man when he and his gang grabbed me. I chased this It," he indicated the dwarf, "through the woods, and fell into a trap."

"El Halcón's bandits are the ones kill my four men. I think el Halcón kill hundreds men in his life. But this one good thing he do. He tell me you are in cave. He say, go hunt you. He don't intend kill you. He say this dwarf kill you, he can. He is little *loco* [crazy], but more evil."

"Now what started old Hawknose on my trail like that, I wonder?" Hal showed pro-

found surprise. "He promised me a trimming. Then he ordered his men to bring me to this hole in the rocks and beat it for the tall timbers. They left me here to get acquainted with It."

"El Halcón great man, but *muy malo* [very bad]. His heart black. Think only of gold and silver. Kill and rob many for it. Don't know why he tell me where find you. No understand why he want save your life. This thing," he glanced contemptuously toward the dwarf, "wanted for murder in four countries. He is more evil than el Halcón, hundred times. *Malo para siempre* [always evil]. But no *loco* all time. I tell more soon. Come. Go now our *hermanos*. They wait for us."

White Shadow picked up the murderous East Indian, slung him over one shoulder like a bag of meal, and motioned to Hal to go ahead of him to the low, shadowed entrance of the cave. Hal went through it first, thankful for his regained freedom. The Yaqui shoved his captive through it, picked him up again outside, and strode on up the stony arroyo over which Hal had been hustled a prisoner only a few hours previous.

The arroyo was short and they soon reached

a green wall of tangled bushes which concealed a natural opening between the arroyo and a much larger canyon. Burdened as he was, White Shadow energetically shouldered his way through the screening bushes, Hal following. They went up a little incline and found themselves on the rough stony floor of a larger, outer canyon, green with alder and cottonwood trees. Looking back at the low-arched natural opening between the arroyo and the larger canyon, Hal saw that it was practically concealed by the luxuriant green wall.

Immediately upon reaching the outer canyon, White Shadow set the dwarf down on the ground and proceeded methodically to rope him about the waist so as to lead him along. The vanquished pride of India protested angrily against such tactics. Finding it was more comfortable to walk than to be dragged along by an unrelenting force, he reluctantly quit balking. The Yaqui led the way through the woods to a spot where he had left the outfit to await his return with the missing Long Trail boy.

"I go alone find you, Little Brent. It is for the vow I made to fight this evil thing myself," the Yaqui explained to Hal on the

way through the forest. "This is last of all I have to do. Now is done." His tone was one of somber satisfaction.

"Did you round up the whole bandit gang, Emperor?" Hal inquired eagerly.

"*Si.* No more Mejicano bandits in these mountains now. El Halcón must die for many crimes he do. No other bandit chief come this country. They be afraid. This no their Mejico."

"El Halcón is one glorious collection of iron nerve." Hal's opinion contained a touch of unwilling admiration.

"Brave enough for anything; anywhere." White Shadow also showed the Indian admiration for courage and daring. "El Halcón travel many countries. Know the world. I think never be in any other country one bandit again like him."

CHAPTER XX

The Gift of El Halcón

WHILE the two reunited comrades of the trail were bending a speedy course through the woods to the designated meeting place, White Shadow recounted in his terse speech the story of his search for the slayers of the four Indians from Emerald Valley. After leaving the Long Trail Boys' camp on that misty morning of several weeks previous the three Indian chiefs had made a swift ponyback journey to Emerald Valley. They had spent two weeks of patient, crafty watching and waiting in the vicinity of Cascade Canyon, trying to discover the possible presence of bandits near the valley. At length White Shadow had captured a Mexican bandit whom he supposed had been sent out on a scouting tour by his chief.

From the prisoner the Yaqui succeeded in gleaning enough information to confirm his own surmise that the bandits had a secret stronghold near Emerald Valley. Regarding

the identity of his chief the captured bandit had preserved a sullen silence. Not one word regarding el Halcón had been spoken. White Shadow had sent the prisoner to Carson City under a strong guard of Indians from Emerald Valley. He had then embarked upon a secret scouting expedition alone, hiding by day and trailing the bandits by night. He had left Shy Beaver and Agunta with four of his men encamped a day's journey away from the valley, there to await his return.

He had then trailed the bandits to the stony arroyo where he had for the first time seen el Halcón. Later he had seen the robber chief riding Serapis with the dwarf perched in front of him in saddle. White Shadow had hastened back to where Shy Beaver and Agunta had made temporary camp and had sent the two chiefs to the valley for the purpose of bringing back a company of twenty of his men with which to capture the smaller force of bandits el Halcón had brought across the Mexican border to the Nevada mountains.

"Oh, mamma! Why couldn't I have been with your gang when you bagged old Hawk-nose!" was Hal's regretful cry. "Where was the fight pulled off? Not in the arroyo, or I'd have heard the guns popping."

"No. We fight bandits in woods. Arroyo bad place for my men fight these. Three, four more little caves in sides of canyon. If we go in arroyo, bandits hide in caves. Shoot at us. We can't see them to shoot them. Many my men killed, *quizás*. Arroyo fine place for el Halcón to hide. He is good woodsman. Know what to do keep safe in woods. Walk in big canyon, you no see hole in rocks to go into arroyo. Many trees and bushes. Look like only rocks. No think another canyon is behind it. If bandits stay there most the time, we have to wait long while, *quizás*, to catch. They go out every day hunt silver mine. I watch three days. I must find out how many bandits el Halcón have, and if all leave arroyo every day."

"It is all the fault of this wretched Indian that I, the royal glory of the East, have been treated like a dog," the Rajah of Bundhar broke in upon White Shadow's recital with vindictive snappiness. Evidently he had been a close listener to the conversation between the two men. "Such disrespect to my illustrious person is abominable!"

"You're likely to land far, far outside the family circle yourself if you're not more re-

spectful," Hal grinningly admonished the disgruntled rajah.

"I am the last of the Rangols. I know nothing about a family circle. I have noticed there is never much sense in anything you say," the dwarf retorted in a tone of lofty dignity which made Hal laugh and White Shadow smile.

"Sorry you think I'm not very bright," Hal said with light mockery.

"I do not think about you at all. I think of myself, and of what a fool el Halcón is. He knows less than this long-legged savage." The rajah jerked his head contemptuously toward White Shadow. "It will be joy to tell el Halcón this when I see him." He commenced one of his growling monologues in an East Indian dialect.

"Let him rave, Emperor. Please go on with your story. I'm crazy to hear about the big round-up." Hal turned to White Shadow.

"This morning, sun-up," the Yaqui again took up his interrupted narrative, "come Agunta, Shy Beaver. They say my men wait in little canyon 'bout two miles from me. They ask what I want do. I send Shy Beaver for my men. I think time come now capture bandits when come with el Halcón.

They do this way. Ride every day same territory, but each day little farther. Every three days ride different direction. I am no sure if come this way again. Wait anyhow. Watch.

"My men leave horses in canyon. Four men stay there with cayuses. Others come on foot. Hide in woods 'bout one mile from arroyo," White Shadow continued. "After while come el Halcón on Serapis. Bandits walk behind Serapis. Then we have good luck. El Halcón tell bandits two must go one way, two go another. Try find out silver mine. Tell them must come back arroyo before sundown. He ride away, too. Four my men go after him. Catch first thing. Others my men slip after others el Halcón's men. My men surprise bandits. They are strong fighters. Bandits don't have much chance shoot. They fight little with knives. Don't kill any my men. Slash two or three. No very bad. My men no kill any bandits. I am glad. It better these hang for many killings," the chief ended with stern justice.

"You certainly put it over on el Halcón. He must have thought your men weren't back yet from the border. He simply took a nervy chance of finding the mine with no one

to protect it. Well, you got him. You kept your vow."

"*Si.* It good I keep soon. Sometimes when vow of brotherhood is made, no can do what must be done for many weeks; months; years, *quizás*," White Shadow asserted, his face falling into unconscious lines of dark resolution. Suddenly the somber gravity of his expression disappeared in one of his rare smiles. "Look." He called Hal's attention to an open space between the trees not many yards ahead of them.

Hal had glimpsed almost in the same instant as his companion a sight which set his heart to beating a joyous tattoo against his ribs. Among the sunlit aisles of trees a group of horsemen was drawn up. There was the good old outfit, waiting for him! Craig was astride Serapis again. Hurray! There was Starlight! Hal's already buoyant spirits soared. Antonio was holding Star's bridle.

Next second Hal had discovered something else. There was a new rider in the familiar ponyback group. He was mounted upon a bright bay pony which certainly did not belong to the outfit. Could it be. Yes, it could. Hal burst forth into a glad, wild cheer and ran forward toward the shouting

group of riders. He flung himself straight into the middle of the group, and upon the stranger who was watching his joyful dash with a broadly welcoming smile.

"The end of the limit! Pal, oh, pal, where did you blow from?" Hal made a joyful grab at the smiling stranger who slid quickly from his pony. The two young men exchanged forceful hand grips.

"Boy, howdy!" exclaimed the other. "This is a happy day for me, and I may thank this brave for it." Clarke Hamden turned his round, boyish face gratefully toward White Shadow. "I beat my time about a month, and all because I had the good luck to run across White Shadow up here in the mountains one day last week."

"Did you get the letter I wrote you about the green knapsack? Did you stop at Sweet Water Ranch to see it?" Hal asked in liveliest excitement.

"No." Hamden shook a head to both questions. "I've been dodging about these mountains for a month. Haven't been near either my club or headquarters. I've been after the dwarf for months. He's wanted in India for the murder of an American diplomat that he committed five years ago. Gordon

Parker was the diplomat. His family have millions, and so they have never let the case drop. Since Parker was a government official I was finally put on the trail of the murderer. I was the first one to get a line on this dwarf. He kept out of sight too slick for anything. I finally traced him to Mexico last May."

"Did you know anything then about el Halcón?" Hal asked.

"Nary a word. I had a hard time getting down to facts about him. He was supposed to be a dead one. It's too long a story to go into now. But tonight, around our grand old camp fire! Leave it to me to tell you a hummer of a story. I'll say now that this midget is Rangol, a dacoit rajah chief, and the worst nut in India, or any other country. He's feared more in India today than el Halcón ever was in Mexico. El Halcón was hiding in India for years. He purposely started the story in Mexico that he had died. He planned to come back some day and live there under another name. But that is part of tonight's yarn, too."

"I want to ask only one more question. How long have you known White Shadow? I tell you, it's great to find out that two of our best pals are best pals themselves!" Hal showed his delight at the discovery.

"Oh, long time. Both government men. Never say much. I tell you, if I know you know Hamden," explained the Yaqui chief. "I don't know that."

"I get you. You're excused for not being a mind reader." Hal glanced, laughing, at his Indian friend. His twinkling eyes happened to come to rest upon the dwarf. White Shadow had again tied his feet and placed him under a tree where he lay, looking not unlike a skin-wrapped papoose.

"Take your eyes from me, senseless thing," the rajah fiercely ordered Hal. "And you, Indian peon, stop staring at me," he snarled at White Shadow. Over the midget's repellent face passed a venomous wave of hatred. It was such an expression as Hal had seen on the dwarf's face when he had looked in the window at Mariposa. "This trouble has come upon me because I lost the talisman of the sacred monkey. It is all the fault of el Halcón. I hate him. He was a fool to come to this country. He was always a fool."

"You admit he is el Halcón, do you?" Hamden briskly questioned the glowering rajah.

"He is el Halcón. That is a fool name, but it suits him. The senseless one, there,"

he pointed scornfully to Hal, "called him old Hawknose. Ha, ha! That is a fine name for him." The dwarf's laughter had a hobgoblin sound.

"And what was the name of el Halcón in India?" Tony spoke in his deep, pleasant voice.

The dwarf eyed the Mexican boy meditatively. "That is none of your business," he said coolly, "but I will tell you because el Halcón hates that name. He was Khoda Shah. He ran away to Mexico to escape death, and came back to India again long afterward when the wolves of Spanish planters had set the detectives upon him. I am of the blood of the high Rangol. He was a dacoit when I was a young rajah. I am his master. He says I am not, but he still obeys me."

"It is as Agunta said," Tony murmured. "El Halcón is not the Mejicano. He is the East Indian."

"Where are Shy Beaver and Agunta? Beg your pardon, Emperor, for not having missed your distinguished granddaddy and his side partner, straight off the bat. Blame yourself for leading forward this prize." Hal showed his teeth affectionately at Hamden. "Come to think of it, I used to belong to the

Long Trail outfit. Where is that noble organization now?"

"Yes, where are they?" Norton grabbed Hal by the shoulders and shook him with gentle force. "It's time you thought of your poor old pals. You put them in an awful stew by disobeying orders. I must hand it to you, Brent. You put yourself in line for a reminder." Norton smiled, but his eyes held grave censure. "This latest piece of recklessness of yours might easily have been your finish."

"I deserve it, Norton." In the midst of happiness, Hal hung his head. Luckily for him the attention of the others had quickly shifted from his flushed face to an oddly assorted trio which was approaching. It consisted of Shy Beaver and Agunta, on foot, and walking haughtily between them, a very tall man in black riding clothes.

"El Halcón!" Hal cried out, just as he had cried out in the woods at first recognition of the bandit chief.

"Crespero!" It was Craig who cried out that name. This was the outfit's first sight of the notorious outlaw.

The bandit chief shrugged his shoulders. "At your service, gentlemen." He bowed

ironically. "Your eyes are keen, Señor Craig. You knew me without my white wig and mustache."

"There are few men of your height, features and manner, Señor Crespero," Craig said shortly.

"There will presently be one less." The outlaw smiled whimsically. "I am not sorry. It is far better to die than to live and be tormented every day by that one." He indicated the dwarf with a bored inclination of the head. "Once upon a time he had a little sense. Now he knows but one thing—to kill, and kill again. That is his pleasure. I have been cruel. But he is a cruel fool. That is something worse than to be cruelty itself."

"I have just said that you were a fool. Now I say it again—fool, fool, fool." The dwarf shrieked the words angrily at the outlaw.

"It is the only time we have ever been of the same mind," was Crespero's scornful retaliation. He relapsed into contemptuous silence. He seemed to have forgotten the presence of his captors.

"Soon come my men. We wait here little longer. They bring with them rest of bandits," White Shadow said. "Then we go plateau."

"Ugh. Good. Cook plenty. Eat fine. Talk long. Smoke peace pipe." Shy Beaver announced this pleasing program. He and Agunta had just finished shaking hands heartily with Hal who was the favorite of the pair.

"Ugh," grunted Agunta. "Fire burn. Gam bake cake. Good." He gave Hal a quick bright look, accompanying it with an encouraging grin.

"Ugh. You've said it, *hermanos*. There's cake on the way to you," Hal made reckless promise.

Presently fourteen of the Indian scouts came up, each in charge of a prisoner. Numbering el Halcón and Rangol, the dwarf, there were sixteen bandits. Two of White Shadow's men had been sent to the canyon to help their comrades with the horses. The company waited until the six scouts from the canyon had arrived with the horses. Then the cavalcade was formed with the prisoners and their guards on foot, the horses of the Indian scouts next and the Long Trail outfit last.

It was necessarily a slow ride, during which the boys had plenty of opportunity to talk to their friend, Clarke Hamden. Shy Beaver,

Agunta, and White Shadow were at the head of the cavalcade, watching alertly to see that none of the prisoners should escape.

After the party reached the plateau, White Shadow called the members of the outfit together and told them his plan of action. He had decided to hold the prisoners on the plateau until two of his men should have gone to Emerald Valley for horses, supplies, and at least ten more men of the regular valley detachment. In order to make the trip to Carson City speedily with the captured bandits, horses for the prisoners would be needed. It would therefore require a stronger guard to escort a ponyback lot of bandits to jail than if they were to be marched there on foot.

"You no have go Carson," White Shadow informed Hamden. "You stay here. Shoot. Fish. Have good time with our *hermanos*. You work hard on this case. Now time to play. Our *hermanos* show you Emerald Valley. I come back soon. Agunta, Shy Beaver stay here, too."

"You're the Prince of Mexico!" Hamden exclaimed gratefully. "That's the best news I've heard since I was invited to go hunting by the Long Trail gang in Oregon. First

honors in this case belong to you. You captured the fellows I was after before I had even a look at 'em."

"*Nada.*" The Yaqui disclaimed credit, adding with a smile, "First in case is Little Brent. He show me scarlet sign. That make Agunta remember 'bout el Halcón. Then we know who look for."

"*Oh, go on.* Don't hand me a case of swelled head," expostulated Hal. "Blame it on Freako. He lost the green knapsack and started the ball to rolling. He was a worse Jonah to el Halcón than the scarlet sign itself. If you don't believe that, ask him."

Later, in crossing the plateau, Hal happened to glance toward the spot where el Halcón sat handcuffed on the ground. He noticed that the outlaw's fathomless dark eyes were fixed upon him. The bandit motioned to him to approach, and, when Hal went up to him, said seriously, "Bring you to me the Mejicano." Hal nodded and went to find Antonio. The two boys walked over to the bandit chief, wondering at his odd request. Tony thought el Halcón's eyes seemed almost gentle as he raised them to the young Mexican's face.

"You sang one night a song I love," he

said. "You sang 'The Stars.' I said then I would never try to kill any of you. Not again did I shoot at you. It was the rajah who had the silent revolver. Because your song was my happiness, I will tell you something. Your *caballo* is the younger brother of Serapis."

"*Mi madre!*" Tony's hands went up in an astonished gesture. "That is wonderful news, Señor Crespero. Of all I have, I love Hidalgo best."

"He used to be called 'Sahib.' I am glad he is now Hidalgo. Always I love Mejico, but never India, though India is my country. Your *caballo*," he now spoke to Hal, "is of the same fine Arabian stock as Hidalgo. I have heard you call him Starlight. These two *caballos*, with ten others, not quite so fine, were stolen from me last year by two of my men. They brought the *caballos* to the United States and sold them far north. You were the ones to buy some of them from the *comerciante de caballos* [horse trader.] They are yours. I have now no more claim to anything. I love Serapis. I sold him to Señor Craig because I was in need of money. I intended when I sold him to get him back again."

"*Good night!*" Hal was completely flabbergasted. "Any more shocks?" he asked the bandit with his characteristically droll air.

"You are a brave young fool, and funny. You make the heart forget its bitterness. I am glad you called the rajah, 'Freako.'" El Halcón's gloomy features lightened a trifle. "He was in the bushes one night and heard you say it. It made him rage. *Gracias* [thank you] because you gave him not the green bag. The pagoda is mine. That he loved most. I let him take it to humor him. Now I give it to you, Mejicano. You hear me, Americano. The green bag is for you. It is mine, too. Both were given me in India. Once I saved two lives. Can you believe that? There is no blood upon either the pagoda or the bag. So the rajah kept the pagoda for a charm. That is all. You are to go." He waved the two boys off and turned away his head in a slow, dignified fashion.

"Señor Norton was right when he said Señor Crespero was at the bottom of the trouble of White Shadow and Agunta. You heard Señor Crespero say to us that he was in need of money. I believe he neglected his *plantación*. He had to leave the double life

to get money for himself. While he robbed much, he lived in luxury. It is said that a robber's gold vanishes overnight. He dreamed, perhaps, that the silver mine would make him rich enough to live in Mejico always as Señor Crespero, and that he would never again have to be el Halcón." This was Tony's reflective summing up of the bandit chief as he and Hal walked away from el Halcón.

"Straight dope, Tonums. But what do you think about Star and Hidalgo?" Hal's question was brimming with exultation. "Let's save it to spring upon the gang around the camp fire tonight." His merry face suddenly sobered. "I'm sorry for him somehow," he added with a backward motion of the head toward el Halcón. "He had all the makings but one of a great man."

"*Es verdad* [is true]," Tony agreed with equal soberness. "No one can be great who is not first good."

"Comee getee; comee getee," shrilled Gam Fu. He was frantically signaling the two boys. The rest of the outfit, Hamden, and the three Indian chiefs, were already gathered about the white oilcloth.

On the other side of the plateau the Indian

scouts were busily preparing bacon, beans, and coffee for themselves and the prisoners. George, Kent, and Gam had got together a hasty snack of canned salmon, bacon, potato chips, coffee, and boxed cocoanut cake for their group. The cake had been brought out in honor of Shy Beaver and Agunta.

"Emperor's men will have a peppy time feeding the Mexican zoo," George said. "They all look hungry enough to snap except old Hawknose. He looks as if he couldn't bear to think about eating. Some social tea!"

"We're going to have a grand social gathering around the camp fire tonight," Hal predicted. "There'll be some spiffy balls of yarn unwound then. Wish it would hurry up and grow dark. The governor thought when he put a kibosh on a trip for us across the Mex border that he was right on deck to preserve the safety of the Long Trail outfit. He'll be surprised to hear that Mexico took a hike across the line to us."

"Hope we'll get across the Mex border next time, eh, Norton?" Kent shot a laughing glance at the guide.

"Ask John Brent," Norton said, smiling.

"That means *you* are game if the governor

can see it," Hal said with brisk satisfaction. "Oh, wait till I see John Brent, III!"

"Next summer you go cross border with silver convoy." White Shadow calmly gave out this pleasant news. "Agunta, Shy Beaver, I, show you country Montezuma. Great forests. High mountains. Good hunting. Different many ways United States. You see many strange things. We are all armed. Bandits no care try fight us. Think Brent, my old friend, say 'yes' to me. I ask him Little Brent, Tony, George can go. Is this to be, Little Father; Pleasant Brave?" His large black eyes roved interrogatively from Norton to Craig. Pleasant Brave was the name Agunta had recently given Hartwell Craig.

"It is to be, Emperor." Norton and Craig spoke together.

"Son my son, smart." Agunta beamed proudly at White Shadow.

"Ugh. Good. Me go. Take hat," promised Shy Beaver.

What happened to the Long Trail Boys the next summer during an expedition to the land of Montezuma will be told in "The Long Trail Boys and the Vanishing Rider."

THE END